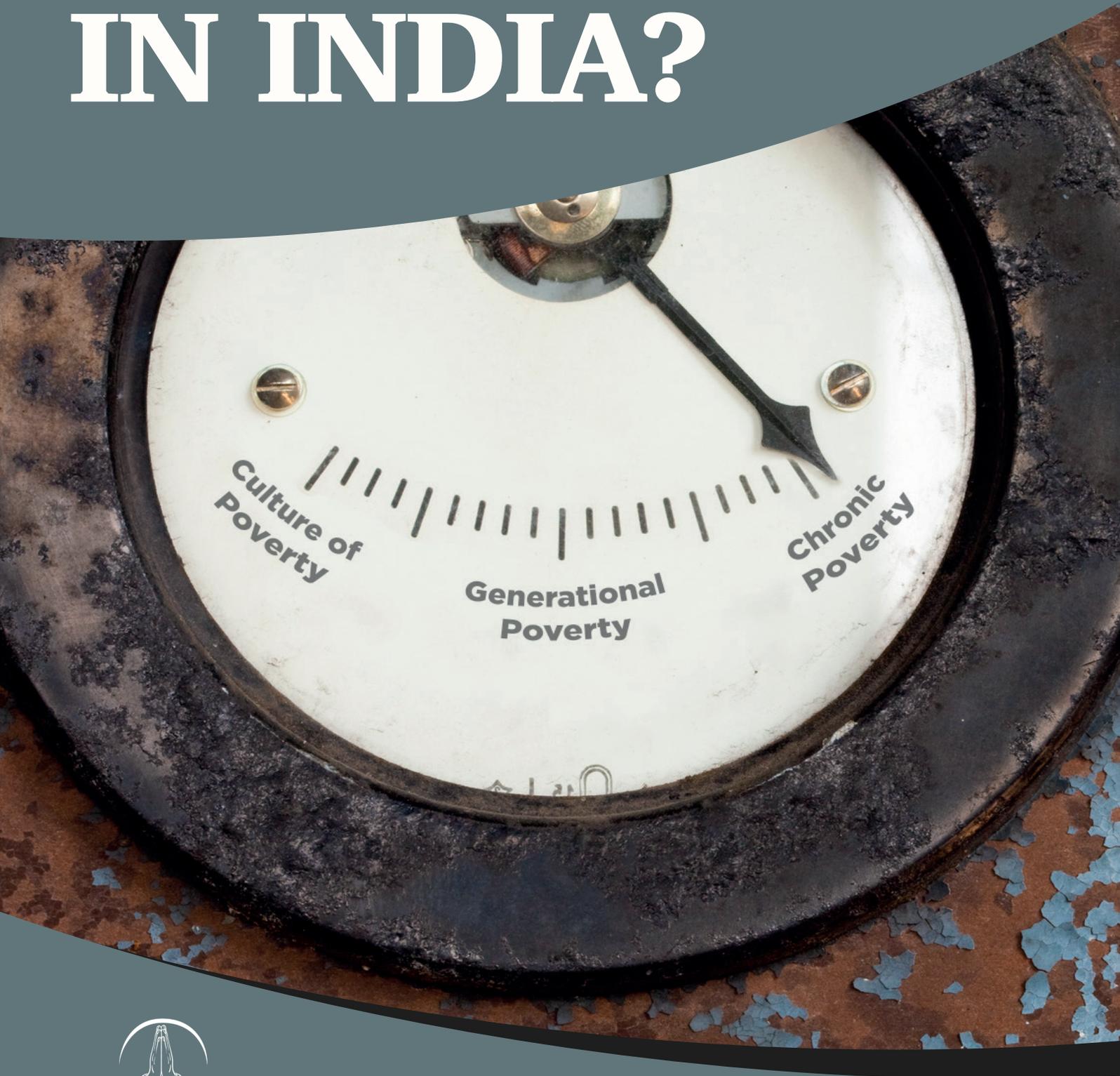


IS POVERTY HEREDITARY IN INDIA?



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Culture of poverty

Introduction

Millions of the poorest in India today were not born into poverty, they have become poor within their lifetimes. Poverty has an essentially vigorous and fluid element to it. Many people fall into poverty (becoming the future poor), even as others (formerly poor), move out of poverty.

For those experiencing poverty, every day is a battle to keep afloat that never allows them to get ahead or envision a better future. Living in poverty means a life of malnutrition, poor hygiene, deplorable conditions and preventable diseases going untreated, which is further exacerbated by systematic inequalities throughout wider society. In addition, exposure

and vulnerability to risk and the inability to cope, plunges people further into poverty and leaves children falling behind in school or failing to attend altogether, conditions that can steal away their childhood and future.

Consequently, negative early experiences impact a person's ability to grow and develop, leaving them trapped in a cycle of poverty. Education is essential to giving children the tools they need to create lasting change in their lives and break the cycle of poverty for themselves and their families. The unrelenting stress of poverty can hinder a child's brain development with long-term consequences on physical and mental well-being, leading to lifelong effects that follow

them into adulthood. Being a poor child increases the chances of being a poor adult however, other factors can operate independently to affect well-being over the course of their life.

The broader narrative that dominates policy discussions on poverty, is the notion that poverty reduction has been equated with the task of moving people out of poverty. However parallel questions are rarely examined, such as; how do people come to be poor in the first place? Was everyone who is poor today, born into poverty?

One could place the blame squarely at the feet of the poor themselves, logically claiming that if those who are poor had acted differently they would not now be poor. This entails yet another assumption, namely that those who are not poor are so because of the way they acted. Hence, the wealthy deserve their riches. I can agree that they do to the extent that they work hard to earn their wealth. However wealth creation isn't that simple, it depends on a number of factors such as talent, receiving a sound education, strong social networks, paths opening to opportunities, supportive and wealthy parents etc. Many people who come into life with few endowments also work hard and yet don't achieve wealth. This kind of argument sullies the reputation of a whole class of people and excuses the lack of fairness applied by the rest of society.

Another notion for the perpetual cycle of poverty is that the poorest have their own culture with a different set of rules, values and beliefs that keeps them trapped within that cycle - generation to generation. To understand the culture of poverty, time is treated differently by the poor; they generally do not plan ahead but simply live in the moment, which prevents them from saving money that could help their children escape poverty. Another aspect of this is a **learned helplessness** because they feel that they are undeserving,

are burdened with low inherited IQ etc. Stories such as these are necessary in order to explain and justify hereditary poverty by wider society that has decided not to offer better opportunities to the poor. This is then passed from parents to children, a mentality that there is no way for them to get out of poverty and so in order to make the best of the situation, they must enjoy what they can, when they can.

This leads to such habits as spending money immediately, often on unnecessary goods such as alcohol and cigarettes, (a form of escapism from the daily grind) thus teaching their children to do the same and trapping them in poverty. That said, leaving poverty is not as simple as acquiring money and moving into a higher class, it also includes giving up certain relationships in exchange for achievement.

A student's peers can have an influence on the child's level of achievement, as coming from a very poor household, a child could be teased or expected to fall short academically. This can cause a student to feel discouraged and hold back when it comes to excelling at school because they fear being mocked if they do well. This helps to explain why the culture of poverty tends to endure from generation to generation, as most of the relationships the poor have are within their own social circle.





Situational poverty

Ruby K. Payne, author of 'A Framework for Understanding Poverty', distinguishes between generational poverty, which is a cycle that passes from generation to generation and has its own distinct culture and belief patterns. Whereas, situational poverty, can generally be traced to a specific incident within the lifetimes of the person or family members in poverty.

A person / family can experience situational poverty when their income and support is decreased due to a specific incident in their life - job loss, separation, death, etc. While there can be a domino effect caused by this one significant change, families experiencing situational poverty tend to remain hopeful, knowing that this is a temporary setback. This typically is not so with generational poverty.

Generational poverty

Factors associated with generational poverty are;

- 1. Hopelessness:**

Most people think of poverty as lacking financial resources to meet basic living requirements. Families dealing with generational poverty are also challenged with the cumulative effect of these different forms of poverty sometimes this creates the most damaging outcome of generational poverty - the constant presence of hopelessness. Hopelessness is the key factor in sustaining the cycle - one generation to the next. Without hope and the belief that life can be better, the motivation and energy needed to break the cycle of poverty are extremely low.
- 2. Surviving vs Planning:**

People caught in the cycle of generational poverty are focused on surviving. They are fixated on the issues and challenges facing them today. It may be money for food, finding a place to live, supporting extended family members, unresolved health issues, etc. This is a daily experience - each day presenting itself with a different struggle, another challenge. All of this is done under the cloak of urgency. The concept of planning typically doesn't exist, due in part because planning is tied to the belief that the individual has sufficient control of their life.
- 3. Values and Patterns:**

The values of those caught in the generational poverty cycle are very different from those who have grown up in comfort. Generational poverty values will focus more on survival and short-term outcomes. In comparison, generally, middle class values encompass education, work and being perceived as a productive member of society. In generational poverty, it is also possible that counterproductive traditions are passed down such as low emphasis on education, low self-esteem and low expectations in general.

Chronic poverty

Chronic Poverty Research Centre (CPRC), is a group of Economists tracking 3,000 of the poorest Indian households for more than three decades. Their definition of chronic poverty is:

“**People, households, and social groups who are poor for sustained and significant or extended periods of their lives and whose families and children may inherit this persistent condition. While chronic poverty is dynamic in that people do climb out of, or fall into poverty in significant numbers, exiting such poverty can prove extremely difficult.**”

CPRC investigated three aspects of poverty;

- What drives poverty
- What retains poverty and
- What causes exit from poverty.

They published 32 research papers explaining various aspects of poverty in India, culminating in their seminal report stating that, “Persistent backwardness and inequality have led to a concentration of poverty in certain parts of India. So there is a geographical dimension to poverty,” It defines the chronic poor, “as people who remain poor throughout their lifetime. Their next generation remaining poor, inheriting the same level of poverty will be highly probable”. Analysis of the papers shows that at least 50 per cent of India’s poor are chronic poor.

The lapsing back of people climbing above the poverty line is the most important reason of chronic poverty, according to the CPRC study. It means that the poverty-eradication efforts are not successful in keeping people above the poverty line. Many of those deemed chronic poor have a long history of being poor and thus, do not have the capacity to absorb unforeseen shocks like natural disasters or personal emergencies such as health issues. With each disaster, with each health cost and with each government decision that impacts these factors, the poorest take the first and fast step towards chronic poverty.

So how can you exit Chronic poverty?

Just as there are many drivers of chronic poverty, so other processes can interrupt chronic poverty. There are a variety of routes to benefit the poor of economic opportunities and help ease their exit from poverty. Analysis of our past work in deprived rural areas explores a few options for policy makers to consider;

- **Expand access** to clean water, clean air and primary health care. These will improve life expectancy and increase physical resilience.
- **Investing in sustainable infrastructure** – increase support for renewable energy, particularly rooftop solar, through appropriate policies and business models, thereby providing greater connectivity and access to economic opportunities.
- **Migration** is more often of a member(s) of a household rather than the whole household, to urban areas for better employment opportunities, especially where extended family networks prior information and contacts can reduce costs and increase benefits.
- **Introduction of a universal basic income**, broader than current schemes that are conditional upon occupation and land ownership can help provide vital resources for subsistence, or for investing in education and health.
- **Owning land:** those poor households who have managed to retain some land are more likely to exit poverty (in urban areas, other assets - perhaps housing security or education - may be more important).
- **Granting women equal property rights** which are a critical component of land ownership. Not having control of land or housing can deprive women from direct economic benefits.
- **Building resilience for the most vulnerable** - About 90% of India’s workforce is informally employed, which includes gig economy workers. They are extremely vulnerable to economic shocks and need greater access to formal credit and social safety nets such as insurance and pension schemes.
- **Education** is the route out of poverty for the poorest. However, millions of children in rural India never see the inside of a classroom. For many families, the long-term benefits of sending their children to school are outweighed by the immediate need to send them to work or keep them at home to help with chores.

Government response

At the national policy level, growth while important, has sometimes been over-emphasised at the expense of specific policies for poverty reduction, yet this is not inevitable. There are a number of policy areas that the government should consider, to stop the processes that drive people into poverty and maintain them there by blocking exit routes and increase opportunities to exit.

By 2022, poverty will be eradicated, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has promised. That would be eight years before India's global commitment of eradicating poverty by 2030 as mandated by The United Nations (Sustainable Development Goal initiative). Modi made the promise on September 25, 2017 at a National Executive meeting of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party. This was at the centre of his promised "New India". This raises the pertinent question: Why is the Indian government unable to raise people above the poverty line despite pumping huge funds into anti-poverty programmes over many decades? There are four probable scenarios.



1. The poverty reduction rate is not adequate, given the level of poverty: India has over 220 million poor, according to the last poverty count.
2. Link between poverty and corruption - In 2003, only 15% of the government's anti-poverty funds reached the poor. Anti-corruption laws have existed since 1968, supported by various Commissions, yet failure has been rampant, exacerbating poverty.

3. They may be adding more poor to the existing list.
4. They may be temporarily raising people above poverty levels but unable to keep them there.

While the above scenarios play out together, a significant number of poor have turned chronic poor.

System of oppression

India's caste system is among the world's oldest forms of social stratification. Hindus are born into their castes, making social mobility nearly impossible and inequality rampant. Those in the lower castes are believed to be paying for the sins they committed in past lives. The caste system divides Hindus into rigid hierarchical groups and is generally accepted to be more than 3,000 years old. The system bestowed many privileges on the upper castes while sanctioning repression of the lower castes by privileged groups. Often criticised for being unjust and regressive, it remained virtually unchanged for centuries, **trapping people into fixed social orders from which it was impossible to escape.**

The tenets of the caste system, based on a sliding scale of entitlements and duties of purity and pollution and the manner in which they are still policed and enforced, are very hard to comprehend. The top of the caste pyramid is considered pure and has plenty of entitlements. The bottom is considered polluted and has no entitlements but plenty of duties. The pollution-purity matrix is correlated to an elaborate system of caste-based, ancestral occupation. To compound the problem further, caste unlike say apartheid, is not colour-coded and therefore not easy to see. Also unlike apartheid, the caste system has buoyant admirers in high places. They argue, quite openly, that caste is the 'social glue' that binds as well as separates people and communities in interesting and on the whole, positive ways. Stressing that it has given Indian society the strength and the flexibility to withstand the many challenges it has had to face.

The Indian establishment blanches at the idea that discrimination and violence on the basis of caste can be compared to racism or apartheid. It came down heavily on Dalits (the Marathi word for 'broken people' - deemed to rank lowest in the caste system) or also known as *Untouchables, who tried to raise caste as an issue at the 2001 World Conference against Racism in Durban, South Africa. It put forward the notion by well-known sociologists who argued at length that the practice of caste was not the same as racial discrimination and that caste was not the same as race therefore insisting that caste was an "internal matter."

** Note: 'Untouchable' is often used interchangeably with 'Scheduled Caste, Backward Caste and Dalit'.*



Life on the streets

Caste

Dalits, or Untouchables, are seen as below the boundaries of the caste system and shoulder the brunt of discrimination, experiencing violence, discrimination and poverty as a result of their status. Their presence, touch, very shadow, is considered to be polluting by privileged-caste Hindus, they were forced to live in segregated settlements and weren't allowed to;

- Use the public roads that privileged castes used;
- Drink from common wells;
- Enter into Hindu temples;
- Attend privileged-caste schools;
- Cover their upper bodies and only allowed to wear certain kinds of clothes and jewellery.

Facing such rigid oppression, how can the poorest within this backdrop ever break this systematic and unjust treatment showered upon them and lead a productive life? Waging a continuous daily battle to gain access to the very basics we take for granted;

- Safe water, adequate food, clothing, shelter, education and healthcare;
- Security and well-being;
- Freedom, dignity and peace of mind;
- Hope for a better future.



Sweeping the streets of Mumbai, India

“ One is actually born a Dalit; you cannot leave a Dalit status. You're born, you live and you die a Dalit. Dalits are employed in some of the most menial jobs... they scavenge, they sweep, they're tanners. They do the foulest, filthiest work, they pollute and therefore, they're known as untouchables. ”

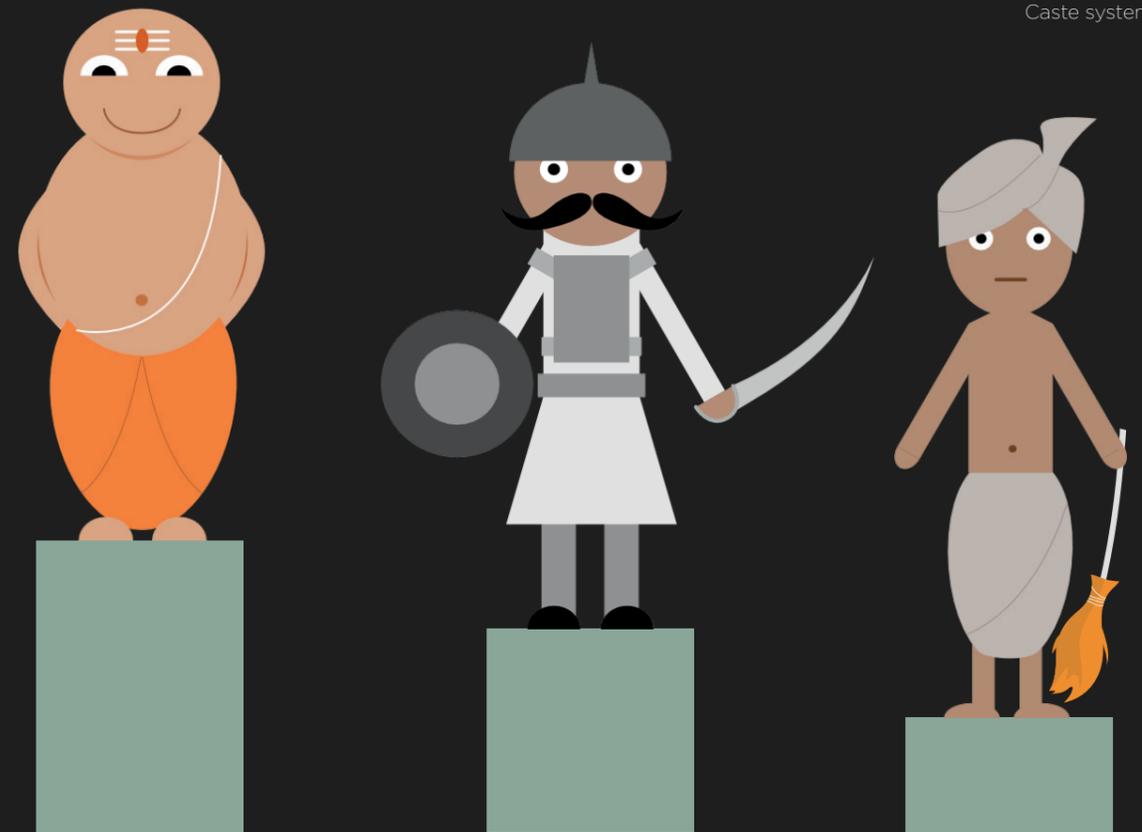
Explained one commentator

This repressive discrimination keeps Dalits constantly at unease with the rest of society and subject to extreme prejudice. Even today, in some cases, Dalits who have forgotten their place in society are raped, beaten, burned or lynched.

“ It's like you are born with a stamp on your forehead and you can never get rid of it. ”

says a Dalit community leader.

This continued cycle of oppression has had a profound effect on the poorest in maintaining a livelihood sufficient for their basic needs. Especially as the above factors play a pivotal role in excluding them from engaging in activities which are deemed an accepted part of daily life in any civilised society.



Dr. Ambedkar was an Indian scholar, jurist, economist, politician and social reformer, who inspired the Dalit Buddhist movement and campaigned against social discrimination towards the Untouchables and perhaps best known as the principle architect of the Indian Constitution. He played a key role in the discussions leading up to independence and served as the first Minister of Law and Justice in post-colonial India between 1947 and 1951. **“In order to fight for equality”, he stated, “there cannot be a more degrading system of social organisation than the caste system. It is a system that deadens, paralyses and cripples the people from helpful activity.”**

Some castes, like the Mahars, the caste to which Dr. Ambedkar belonged, had to tie brooms to their waists to sweep away their polluted footprints; others had to hang spittoons around their necks to collect their polluted saliva. Men of the privileged castes had undisputed rights over the bodies of untouchable women. Their mantra being, love is polluting, rape is pure. In many parts of India, much of this continues today.

“To the Untouchables,” Dr Ambedkar wrote in 1945, with the sort of nerve that present-day intellectuals in India find hard to summon...

“ Hinduism is a veritable chamber of horrors. For a writer to have to use terms like ‘Untouchable’, ‘Scheduled Caste’, ‘Backward Class’ and ‘Other Backward Classes’ to describe fellow human beings, is like living in a chamber of horrors. ”



Is poverty hereditary?

“ Riches is just a result of doing things in a certain way. ”

Wallace D. Wattles

One could argue that genetics has nothing to do with poverty. If your parents are poor it does not mean that you must be poor your entire life. The moment you came out into this material world, you're in charge of your own exploration and experiences. If you were born poor and you die poor, then that is your fault not your genes.

The question whether or not you remain poor though, could be greatly influenced by your parents, environment, peers, upbringing, education, culture and networks within your society, as this will shape your thinking, outlook and aspirations. Therefore being poor has nothing to do with heredity. To get deeper into this debate, let us touch on how a person becomes rich or poor. According to the book of Wallace D. Wattles, *The Science of Getting Rich*, "Riches is just a result of doing things in a certain way." That certain way must be the right way of doing it, which poor people don't know. Since our mind is empty when we are born and knowledge and skills can only be learned or acquired during our journey of life, riches or poverty experiences are only determined by what knowledge we learned or missed in our life (as we grow our thought patterns), which also control our ways of doing things.

The argument follows that if we fill our mind with negative thoughts and have self-limiting beliefs and aspirations, even if we were born rich, no doubt, we will become poor at some point in the future. On the

other hand, even if we were born poor but we learned how to become rich, we completely eliminate fear in our consciousness and we acquired some skills and knowledge and of doing things in a certain way, we may become rich and end that poverty experience. Therefore one can argue that it has nothing to do with genes. The moment we are born, we become open to all possibilities - to become rich or poor.



A homeless person sleeping outdoors

Permanent underclass

The combination of societal pressure and inadequate policy effort from government has increased poverty and inhibited living standards for the lowest castes and a key component of this is the lack of social mobility. If there is minimal or no social mobility in that society, if rules, institutions and mentalities make it hard for people to escape the social class of their parents, then this not only reduces fairness, reward and opportunity but it also determines the kind of poverty in that society. Poverty becomes something like a hereditary disease, the poor become a **permanent underclass** and society no longer helps these people to break the vicious cycle of poverty inherited from past generations.

Over the past couple of decades due to affirmative action and legal protection, the intensity of caste based discrimination has reduced in the workplace. However ending discrimination against Dalits is an enormous undertaking for the Indian government and clearly progress has been sluggish at best. Therefore the next phase must be to speed up the implementation of a broader acceptance for lower castes by wider society.



DALIT LIVES MATTER

Conclusion

The marginalisation of the lowest caste communities remains one of the gravest human rights violations that India struggles with today. While some believe that public discrimination has decreased in recent years, the fact remains: Dalits are still considered 'Untouchables'. They continue to live on the margins of society and struggle for survival on a daily basis. As one commentator put it to me, *"We are still Dalit, still broken, still oppressed"*.

It is fair to say that there are a myriad of factors which increase the likelihood that poverty is hereditary. Through our work we find that poverty is not transferred as a 'package', but as a complex set of positive and negative factors that affect an individual's chances of experiencing poverty, either in the present or at a future point in their life journey. The factors influencing an individual's likelihood of being poor include access to resources from one generation to the next, which can be positive or negative. Furthermore, the perception of risk and levels of vulnerability and resilience combine to influence how the poorest responds to shocks and opportunities during their life course.

"We are still Dalit, still broken, still oppressed."

Commentator

We find that the traditional caste system remains a major impediment for escaping poverty and an equally strong risk for falling into poverty. Our experience suggests that in rural areas, families that escaped poverty over time, were those that managed to increase their land holding or to use existing land more intensively either by increasing irrigation or crop diversification, found work away from agriculture, increased skills or education, acquired more assets, or reduced the family size. Conversely, those families that fell into poverty, were the ones that lost land or operational area, experienced cropping shocks, increased family size, did not accumulate wealth, did not reduce liabilities, had members who fell ill, suffered a natural calamity, belonged to a lower caste, were landless, uneducated and could not easily change occupation.

Given that the caste system is so entrenched within the fabric of Indian society, it is evident that for those born into the lowest caste, there is no doubt that poverty is transmitted from one generation to another, with poor parents having poor children, who are more likely to become poor adults themselves. This is further exacerbated by the fact that the poorest are having to fight a parallel battle of survival alongside the systematic abuse emanating from the caste system.

Statistics in India back this conclusion today, people born into poverty are much more likely to remain poor. Some people might escape it but for the majority, hard work isn't the solution when the overriding shadow of the caste system looms largely over them.

Escaping this perpetual system of oppression is nigh on impossible as decades of generational poverty has instilled in these people feelings of powerlessness, inferiority, victimhood and marginality. These feelings in turn have produced self-destructive values, developing a 'defeatist mind set' and behaviour patterns, following decades of generational poverty. Consequently, through our work, **we find that poverty is becoming hereditary in India**, at least for a sizeable population and we firmly concur with the Chronic Poverty Research Centre, that those who are chronically poor, will definitely pass on poverty to their next generation.

Bhupendra Mistry

Founding Director
KAMLA FOUNDATION
2021

"Poverty often deprives a man of all spirit and virtue, it is hard for an empty bag to stand upright."

Benjamin Franklin



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Kamla Foundation is based in the UK helping vulnerable communities in India, develop their capacity to meet basic needs and create solutions to poverty and injustice.

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