

Chapter 1

Situating Poverty

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The vast majority of India's poor live in rural areas or in pockets of urban areas—in hamlets or slum clusters, in inhospitable terrain, outliers of the development circle. But that is not all. If it were a mere geographical challenge, the poor could be drawn into the vortex of the developmental arena sooner or later. But the challenge is bigger. While the poor stand out in their poverty and deprivation, they are not able to stand up against the maladies of the system and its agents from whom they draw their sustenance. The power equations at their level are simply not empowering. They need to break many a vicious circle to get into the virtuous circle of development. A rising tide raises all boats provided the boats are all in the same water body.

How do we break the entry barriers into the development arena? How do we move on from theories of entitlements and opportunities to actually facilitating access to these entitlements and opportunities? We need to understand the fundamental constraints in building a realistic vision. What better understanding can we have than journeying along with the poor through their lives and being educated by them on what constraints they face?

Of course, several macroeconomic realities are not easily understood at the subaltern level. Money supply, credit, balance of payments, and many more that have a microlevel impact. We will not get into this. But several problems and issues at the grassroots level affect the poor and will be useful to reflect for policy. In fact, the poor themselves have many suggestions for a poverty reduction agenda. To preserve the richness of the

flow of information from the people who matter for poverty reduction, this publication attempts to reflect reality in its undiluted form.

The emerging reality does not propose rehashing of the development agenda. However, it points to directions for reprioritizing rather than spreading out thin, changing systems and approaches, better recognizing who the real poor are, and how to zero in on them in the development process.

Scale of the Study

The participatory poverty assessments (PPAs) were carried out over a period of 5 years over 2001-2005 and encompassed 842 locations in 78 districts spread over seven states in India. They covered over twenty thousand poor persons. The studies included a span of geographical areas and states in various stages of economic and social development. The states covered included Assam, Chattisgarh, Gujarat, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Sikkim, and West Bengal.

The study was led by the state Governments. The study covered rural and urban areas, mixed and separate gender groups, various categories of the poor, and a range of stakeholders. The study mainly covered primary stakeholders, i.e., the poor people directly affected by development processes and initiatives. However, it also included discussions with secondary stakeholders or intermediaries in the process of delivering aid to primary stakeholders, like governmental, nongovernmental and private sector organizations. The study also captured views of external stakeholders, including local leaders, academicians, and others who wield influence in the development circle.

Methodology

PPAs help foster an understanding of poverty from the perspective of the poor. PPAs are a way of getting the larger picture from the smaller pictures of poverty at the grassroots. It is a kind of feedback mechanism from poor people as primary stakeholders and the kind of changes required in policy, strategies, and approaches to reduce poverty. PPAs provide space for people's reality to emerge. In PPAs, the focus is on participatory interaction. Such interactions can reveal new insights, priorities, issues, and approaches. PPAs are conducted with communities, groups, individuals, children, men, and women.

Conventional poverty assessments and PPAs are different in their paradigm, approach, methodology, and principles. Conventional assessments or

multi-topic surveys are based on fixed sets of questions, which are closed-ended and mostly encourage quantification of responses. Closed-ended approaches face the in-built risk of overlooking aspects or priorities of the target groups.

The methodology for the study included application of a wide array of PPA tools using visual modes of analysis and communication, with information synthesis, sharing, and dissemination at all levels. The need to conduct oneself with appropriate values, attitudes, and behavior was one of the paramount principles. The processes were undertaken in a nonintimidating, non-imposing, relaxed, and convenient (to the poor) fashion. Some of the tools tailored to meet the various information needs of the study have been listed below:

- **Locality Map** – to identify the incidence and prevalence of different poverty-indicating phenomena in different localities of the poor;
- **Social Mapping** – to identify the various facets of rural and urban poverty such as families with vulnerability, disadvantage, and persons benefited from schemes and programs, location of opinion leaders, opinion makers;
- **Resource mapping** – to identify the availability of resources to the various sections of the population across caste, class, and gender;
- **Mobility Map** – to determine access to different services and resources by different sections of the community, in terms of distance, convenience, frequency, etc.
- **Historical Transect** – primarily to determine the growth and evolution of the localities in terms of various resource endowments and social development indicators;
- **Time Line** – to determine consequential events in the history of the places, people, institutions, and enterprises profiled in the course of the PPA study;
- **Seasonality Diagrams** – to determine changes in livelihood conditions, problems, and entitlements of the poor across different periods in a year;
- **Daily Activity Schedules** – to understand and analyze the drudgery and hardships faced by different kinds of poor in their day-to-day lives;
- **Flow Diagrams** – to determine linkages among various kinds of behavior, norms, and experiences of poor people having a causal or consequential bearing on their lives;

- **Matrix Ranking, Scoring, and Analysis** – to assess various objects of relevance—e.g., livelihood options, occupational choices, castes, institutions, etc.—in relative as well as absolute terms, for ascertaining their role in people’s lives;
- **Pair-wise Comparison Matrix** – to assess the relative strengths and weaknesses of various objects of relevance on focused criteria, undertaken in pairs, i.e., each object of comparison against each other;
- **Force-held Analysis** – to determine the relative merits of opposite perspectives, behavior or decision options that impinge upon the quality of life of the poor, e.g., analysis of perceived advantages of participating in a self-help group with respect to the perceived gains of opting out;
- **Venn Diagram and Mapping** – to compare various objects of relevance (e.g., institutions, diseases, castes, occupations, etc.) with respect to each other in a step-by-step manner, using multiple criteria;
- **Evaluation Wheels/Cobweb Diagrams** – to evaluate the status/performance of an object on different yardsticks, e.g., evaluation of an institution on multiple criteria as perceived importance, transparency, accessibility, and integrity.

Zeroing-in on the Poor

The greatest challenge facing the researchers in the PPA study was to use a sampling framework that optimally represented the diverse categories of the poor. Besides, ensuring an objective and convincing approach for site selection was extremely important due to the varied preferences prevailing among the diverse stakeholders.

The selection of the regions and districts was based on a series of exercises involving a wide range of stakeholders. The challenge of the exercise lay on the need to use a process, which could identify locations representing the diverse geopolitical endowments and capture socioeconomic characteristics of different regions.

Reaching out to the poor

The researchers were required to reach out to the poorest and constantly ascertain the suitability of time and venue while interacting with the poor. The opportunity cost of the poor participating in the process was accorded highest importance, and the processes were facilitated in a lei-

surely, analysis-oriented, and spontaneous manner suiting the convenience of the poor. The fieldwork hours were flexible enough to consult the poor at hours of their convenience. The timing of the visits ranged from 6 a.m. to 11 p.m., whenever the poor could be contacted without causing them any inconvenience. A Participatory Well-being Assessment was conducted to determine the local definitions of well-being and poverty.

The participatory assessments carried out extensively captured the perceptions of the poor. In addition, extensive use of semi-structured discussions, focused group meetings, and individual interviews was also resorted to. A large number of case studies were conducted to profile the most vulnerable people in different locations and conditions.

Triangulation was carried out at each location wherein the concerns of each of the group consulted were presented to the community, cross-checked, and verified through multiple sources to overcome any researcher/participant biases.

Documentation and Synthesis

On-line documentation was undertaken at many locations to overcome problems of loss of data. Reviews were undertaken daily to track progress and to identify gaps, and remedial measures in the form of gap-filling visits were undertaken regularly.

Key conclusions were drawn about the poverty conditions prevailing in different PPA sites by pooling together outcomes disaggregated into different thematic heads spanning livelihood alternatives, gender relations, coping strategies, institutions, governance, infrastructure, environment impact, access to services and service delivery, among others. State Implementation Committees (formed in each state and consisting of a cross section of stakeholders spanning government, academics, local administrators, and nongovernment organizations) examined the tentative conclusions under each theme. Based on the feedback received from these committees, gap-filling exercises were undertaken. The findings were documented and indexed and the conclusions were discussed with the State Implementation Committees.