

What Do Indian Middle Class Attitudes to Poverty Tell Us About the Politics of Poverty Reduction?

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What makes the middle classes oppose or support initiatives intended to lift people out of poverty, and how can the development community secure their interest in and approval of such policies? The assumption among donors, development practitioners and researchers is often that the middle class are either not interested in helping the poor, or are motivated by self-interest when they oppose poverty alleviation initiatives because they fear that their own position will become more precarious. This paper examines the attitudes of middle class Indians to poverty, and its findings reveal the complexity of their perceptions and beliefs. It shows that self-interest is not the only driver of middle class disapproval of assistance for the poor. It concludes that a political approach to policy design needs to be less institution-focused and to take public opinion into account.

Approaches to development and explanations of developmental failure have changed significantly over the last two decades. In the 1990s, the focus was largely on governance; in the 2000s, the focus shifted to institutions and incentives, and how they influence developmental trajectories. This approach has increasingly accommodated an understanding of the role played by politics in the creation and impact of weak or strong institutions. It is now widely accepted among international development scholars and practitioners that politics plays a central role in producing and perpetuating poverty around the world.

However, this study argues that the institutional focus, combined with a general assumption that political behaviour is largely driven by self-interest, has created an approach that is too narrow. It is unable to illuminate how change happens.

Specifically, this study examines the attitudes of middle class Indians to poverty and the implications of their beliefs and perceptions for poverty alleviation initiatives.

It concludes that public attitudes and beliefs should have a role in policy design and implementation. In the non-development political science literature, these factors are given a great deal of attention and are seen as critical to the analysis of political process issues such as representation, accountability and decision-making. In the development context, a better understanding of public attitudes to poverty in developing countries can further our understanding of the political processes that can lead to poverty reduction.

Methodology

The study is based on qualitative, exploratory and inductive research. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 41 respondents living in various urban and industrial centres in the western Indian state of Gujarat. The questions asked were sufficiently broad to allow participants to focus on issues they thought important.

Purposive sampling was used to select participants to make sure the sample was representative of gender, age, religion, caste, income and occupation. Urban dwellers were selected because the research literature shows that the majority of India's 'new' middle class are urban-based. For the purposes of this study, Varma's (2007; viii) broad definition of India's middle class provides a useful guide:

...anybody who has a home to live in and can afford three meals a day, and has access to public transport and schooling, with some disposable income to buy such basics as a fan or watch or cycle, has already climbed on to the middle class bandwagon...below the two percent of the very rich, and above the three hundred million consisting of those below the poverty line plus the two hundred million or so who may not be destitute but are still very poor.

Key findings

Three broad themes emerged from participants' responses to questions about poverty and the poor in India. These middle class respondents believed that:

- poverty is part of the natural order;
- getting out of poverty depends on individual effort and merit;
- the government does little to help them and they are the principle victims of corruption while, as they see it, the poor receive substantial government support.

Lessons

Poverty may be a highly politicised issue even in a development context. Poverty is often assumed to be a peripheral issue in the domestic politics of developing countries and regions, since it is also often assumed that the poor are disempowered and voiceless. In fact, in democracies such as India, where the enfranchised poor greatly outnumber the middle class, populist politics designed to capture their electoral support is likely to be commonplace. Campaigns to eradicate poverty have been part of India's electoral campaign narratives for almost half a century. This in turn has fed into the attitudes of other social groups, particularly the 'new' urban middle classes, who see themselves as marginalised by both the rhetoric and the resulting poverty alleviation policies.

The politics of policy design and implementation are important. Simply asking whether a certain policy will alleviate poverty is not enough. Which other groups will be affected, for better or worse, by such policies? Which groups will support or oppose them, and what can be done to increase support? Given the preoccupation of India's middle class with individual effort and merit, for instance, it would seem that they are more likely to support policies that promote education and employment for the poor than those that deliver unconditional cash transfers.

Public opinion and political action are not only driven by self-interest. Current thinking and practice tend to assume that support for policies and programmes is prompted largely by self-interest. This study shows that among India's middle class, ideas, values and narratives all have a crucial part to play. They will support poverty alleviation policies that do not directly benefit them if those policies 'fit' their values. So, for instance, they are likely to support a policy that offers the children of the poor free school meals. The incentive benefits poor parents who are likely to let their children spend time being educated rather than working to

contribute to the family budget, but this approach also fits a widely-held belief among the middle class that education is a key factor in lifting people out of poverty.

It is important to find out what drives disengagement of the middle classes from the poor in developing countries.

This information is crucial for building coalitions for change. In India, three aspects of the current political process seem to alienate the middle classes from the intractable problems faced by the poor: populist policies targeted at the poor and perceived by the middle classes as vote-buying; a political class widely perceived as endemically corrupt; and a sense that the country is, in effect, run by large, wealthy corporations. The general assumption in development is that the middle classes defend their own position – and, perhaps, that they simply don't care about the poor – when they are dismissive of poverty alleviation initiatives. The findings of this study suggest that, in fact, India's middle class feel they have been frozen out of the political process and have no political space of their own in which to operate.

Download the full paper at: <http://publications.dlprog.org/IndianMClassAttitudesPoverty.pdf>

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