Research Paper **33**

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

Niheer Dasandi
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DLP aims to increase understanding of the political processes that drive or constrain development. Its work focuses on the crucial role of home-grown leaderships and coalitions in forging legitimate institutions that promote developmental outcomes.

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Contents

About the author

Dr Niheer Dasandi is a DLP research fellow at University College London. His research focuses on political-bureaucratic interaction, the politics of policy reform in developing countries, the political economy of aid, and the links between inequality and poverty. niheer.dasandi@ucl.ac.uk

Acknowledgements

Executive summary

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 under-standing 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.

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 principal 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.

Introduction

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. The most recent political turn in development that has taken place over the last twenty years has centred on the role of political institutions in the development process. Differences in the design of political institutions are widely seen as the principal reason for the differences in the levels of development around the world (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012). While this research has been highly influential, the emphasis on institutional constraints tends to 'overdetermine failure and underexplain the potential for change' (Grindle 2004: 8). Indeed, recent studies demonstrate how leaders and reform coalitions have mobilised supporters and outmanoeuvred opposition to overcome institutional constraints and bring about change. Such examples have led to calls to move beyond focusing exclusively on institutional constraints that emphasise stability towards better understanding the political processes that can bring about change (Levi 2006; Hudson and Leftwich 2014; Hudson and Dasandi 2014).

This paper contributes to this call for broadening our understanding of the 'politics of development' by looking at what public attitudes to poverty in developing countries can tell us about the politics of poverty reduction. Specifically, I examine attitudes of middle class Indians (MCIs) to poverty, based on in-depth interviews conducted in the Indian state of Gujarat. The study uses the main themes that emerge from the analysis of MCI attitudes to poverty to draw lessons for better engagement with the politics of development.

Three main themes emerge from the interviews with members of the middle class in India. First, there is a tendency among MCIs to treat poverty as an inevitable consequence of the natural order. Second, individual effort and attributes are seen as the principal reason why some households (including their own) have managed to move out of poverty. Third, middle class disengagement with poverty is closely linked to negative views of the government and class politics in India.

Four lessons emerge from this analysis for understanding the politics of poverty reduction. First, poverty is a highly politicized issue in countries, such as India, which has implications for government efforts to tackle poverty. Second, attention needs to be given to better understanding the politics of policy design and implementation. Third, more attention needs to be given to the role of ideas, values, and narratives in societies, rather than self-interest alone. Finally, building coalitions for change requires a better understanding of the drivers of disengagement with poverty in developing countries.

This paper is structured as follows. First, I discuss the recent political turn in development, and the need for better engagement with public attitudes. Second, I detail the case selection and the methodology used in the analysis. Third, I provide the main empirical findings of the paper based on the interviews with MCIs. Fourth, I discuss the lessons that the analysis provides for understanding the politics of poverty reduction, before offering concluding remarks.

Institutions, politics, and public attitudes

The growing recognition of the central role that politics plays in the development process is, in large part, due to the rise of new institutionalism. A number of important studies have argued the quality of political institutions in a state is the primary driver of development (e.g. North 1990; Rodrik *et al.* 2004; Acemoglu and Robinson 2012). From this perspective, institutions – particularly those linked to property rights and elite constraints – are the 'rules of the game' that shape human interaction. Good political institutions offer incentives for desirable economic behaviour, while weak institutions incentivize rent-seeking behaviour by elites.

The influence of this work has extended to development policy, most notably through the emphasis on 'political economy analysis' (PEA), which has become a catch-all term applied to the efforts made by development organisations over the past twenty years to understand how political processes affect patterns of development. While development organisations initially focused on 'governance' in the 1990s, more recent PEA 'emphasises the way in which institutional incentives shape behaviour to produce positive or dysfunctional development outcomes (Hudson and Leftwich 2014: 6; Carothers and de Gramont 2013).

The work on institutions in academic and policy research has done much to explain vast differences in levels of poverty around the world, and has also been important for bringing politics back into development. There are, however, significant limitations with the current preoccupation with institutions and incentives. First, the institutional approach takes an overly narrow approach to understanding politics. The second and related issue is that the institutional approach, with its focus on constraints, offers little insight into how change happens (see Grindle 2004; Levi 2006; Banerjee and Duflo 2011; Hudson and Leftwich 2014; Hudson and Dasandi 2014).

In this paper, I consider one area that has largely been overlooked as a result of this narrow approach to engaging with the role of politics in developmental change; namely, understanding public attitudes and beliefs in developing countries. A better understanding of public attitudes and beliefs is important as it can inform our thinking on how change occurs. As Graham (2002: 7) notes, public attitudes 'develop into persistent patterns of political and economic behaviour, and are of particular importance to the degree of political support that can be generated for redistribution and other forms of social assistance.'

The importance of understanding public opinion and attitudes has long been accepted in the 'non-development' political science literature, on the basis that it is central to representation, democratic accountability, and decision-making (see Aldrich *et al.* 2006; Page and Shapiro 1983; Holsti 1996; Burstein 2003). Within political approaches to development, however, less emphasis is placed on the role of public attitudes and beliefs.[1]   There are several reasons for this.

First, as noted above, recent engagement with the politics of developing countries has been significantly informed by the institutional approach. From this perspective, poorer nations are poor because of the 'extractive institutions' in these countries, which empowers elites and disenfranchises the majority of people (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012). Hence, public attitudes are not seen as important because the public is believed to be by-and-large excluded from (formal) political processes in these countries.

Second, while some recent international development thinking and practice goes beyond a focus on institutions, and considers the politics that lie behind institutions (see Rocha Menocal 2014); this approach is still based on a narrow focus on self-interest and incentives (Hudson and Leftwich 2014). Indeed, as Tendler (1997: 5) notes, the mainstream development community is 'guided by an almost religious belief in self-interest as an explanation of human behaviour'. Public attitudes are, therefore, given little consideration, because they are seen as either reflecting the self-interest of different groups, or having no significant impact on human behaviour.

Third, even if strong assumptions of self-interest are relaxed, as is the case with some PEA studies, public attitudes may be overlooked due to issues of feasibility and capacity, rather than public attitudes being seen as unimportant. Discussions of PEA do sometimes refer to the need to consider prevailing public attitudes and beliefs (e.g. DFID 2009; Unsworth and Williams 2011). The reason this has not been more concretely translated into in-depth analysis of attitudes, may in part be because PEA has increasingly 'become a tool or product "sold" to donors and "done" externally', which prevents more meaningful engagement with the contexts in which donors are working (Fisher and Marquette 2014: 3).

A need for better engagement with public attitudes in seeking to understand the role of politics in development is needed for a number of reasons. With regard to political institutions, while a distinction between 'inclusive' and 'extractive' is useful for analytical purposes, the notion of 'extractive' institutions fails to reflect the complex reality of political institutions across the developing world. It ignores the significant number of developing countries that now have competitive elections, where there is scope for the public to influence decision-making processes (Diamond 2011). Furthermore, research on autocratic regimes demonstrates that public opinion and beliefs matter a great deal for these regimes (see Svolik 2012; Simpser 2013; Weeks 2012).

It addition, while the quality of institutions is certainly important for understanding whether governments seek to improve the quality of the lives of all members of the population, so too are other factors, such as leadership and public beliefs, as Levi (2006: 6) explains:

> The quality of government depends on the quality of institutions and constitutional design but also on the quality of leadership, the accuracy of beliefs held by the population about the nature of the world in which they live, and the existence of preferences for a society that is just and fair for the minority as well as the majority.

Recent studies, indeed, demonstrate how change often occurs despite weak political institutions (e.g. Grindle 2004; Melo *et al.* 2012; Harrison and Kostka 2014; Fabella *et al.* 2014). In these cases, leaders and reformers were able to create the space necessary to implement policy and institutional reforms. They were able to create room to manoeuvre, in part because they understood the attitudes and beliefs of different groups and so were able to design reforms in ways that generated public support and reduced opposition. Hence, understanding public attitudes and beliefs is important because 'the possibility of transformation from an ineffective to effective government rests to a considerable extent on popular beliefs and the norms that result' (Levi 2006: 12).

In this study, I further demonstrate how a better understanding of public attitudes and beliefs can shed light on the political processes that can lead to developmental change. Drawing on in-depth interviews with members of India's middle class, I examine what attitudes to poverty among middle class Indians tell us about the politics of poverty reduction.

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1   A number of important studies do examine attitudes of policy and business elites in developing countries (Reis and Moore 2005; Hossain 2005; Kalebe-Nyamongo and Marquette 2014).

Case selection and methodology

This study examines attitudes of middle class Indians towards poverty in the country, and draws lessons from this analysis for understanding the politics of poverty reduction. The middle class in India has been the focus of considerable recent attention. A number of studies have sought to define the Indian middle class; these definitions are used to estimate its size (e.g. Meyer and Birdsall 2012; Varma 2007; Kapur 2010).[2] There has, however been little agreement in their assessments, which means estimates of its size vary from around 50 million people to over 250 million (Kapur 2010).[3] Given this lack of agreement, Varma's (2007: viii) broad definition of the 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.

Much of the recent focus is on the 'new' middle class, which has grown in size as a result of the country's economic liberalisation policies in the 1980s and early 1990s, but is otherwise highly diverse, in terms of income, caste, social capital, and regional cultures (Mawdsley 2004). Particularly important for this study, is the argument made by scholars that this new middle class hinders poverty reduction efforts, through its influence on politics and policies in the country. Dréze and Sen (2013) argue the principal reason for India's slow pace of poverty reduction lies with the politics in the country; specifically, policies are skewed in the interests of the middle class to the detriment of the poor. This, they contend, is because the middle class dominates public debate in the country, and consequently their complaints have become the main focus of the major political parties, in sharp contrast to the lack of attention given to the poor (Dréze and Sen 2013: 287). Others go further, arguing the state not only overlooks the poor, but also reproduces class interests and inequalities in Indian society (Mosse 2010; Fernandes 2004).

The view that the Indian middle class hinders poverty reduction efforts in the country though its influence on political leaders, means that examining MCI attitudes to poverty is especially relevant. The analysis here considers how middle class Indians perceive and frame the issue of domestic poverty by employing a qualitative, exploratory, and inductive methodological approach. The objective of the research is to identify the main themes in MCI attitudes to poverty, and to assess what these themes can tell us about the politics of poverty reduction. As such, I do not focus on the degree to which the attitudes of participants in this study are representative of all middle class Indians, nor do I assess the extent to which MCIs hinder poverty reduction efforts, as recent studies claim.

The analysis is based on semi-structured interviews with MCIs, using basic questions to prompt discussion that were sufficiently broad to enable interviewees to focus on issues they felt were most important.[4] The research was conducted in the western Indian state of Gujarat between August and September 2013. The interviews took place in the three largest cities in Gujarat: Ahmedabad, Surat, and Vadodara. Interviews were also conducted in the industrial city of Anand, and in the two smaller urban centres, Rajpipla and Vallabh Vidyanagar. The new Indian middle class being largely urban-based supports the focus on urban areas (Meyer and Birdsall 2012). In total, 41 interviews were conducted.

The participants in this study were selected on the basis of their income levels, professions, and whether they self-identified as middle class. Participants were selected using purposive rather than random sampling, as a considered effort was made to ensure that there was variation across gender, age, religion, caste, income and occupation. In general – and particularly across the three themes discussed in the analysis – there were no significant differences in attitudes across the demographic characteristics. Furthermore, all of the interviewees demonstrated a clear willingness to speak on behalf of the middle class.

The interviews were conducted in Gujarat for several reasons. First, given the lack of consensus in defining the Indian middle class, a focus on a single state enabled middle class individuals to be identified more easily. Secondly, the middle class in Gujarat are indicative of the 'new' Indian middle class, as the growth in the middle class is strongly linked to processes of economic liberalization in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Yagnik and Sheth 2005). Finally, focusing exclusively on Gujarat was done for reasons of feasibility. Most interviews were conducted in Gujarati, of which I have a working knowledge.[5] While the interviews took place in Gujarat, the discussions were about poverty in India more generally.

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2   Kapur (2010) provides an overview of these measures.

3   Meyer and Birdsall's (2012) recent estimates of the size of the Indian middle class, based on the number of people who have reasonable economic security, is 70 million people or around 10 per cent of the population.

4   These questions considered definitions, causes and trends in poverty in India, along with questions about the role of different actors in poverty reduction and types of policies implemented.

5   Some interviews took place in English, particularly with younger respondents.

Middle class Indians on poverty and the poor

This section presents the findings of the analysis. Three broad themes emerge from the interviews. The first is the naturalization of poverty by the middle class; the second is the emphasis placed on individual effort and merit in explaining why some households are poor and others are not; and the third is middle class attitudes to the government, and particularly class politics in the country.

The naturalization of poverty

The interviews demonstrated a strong tendency among MCIs to 'naturalize' poverty and inequality in the country. From this perspective, poverty is accepted as an inevitable consequence of the natural order of the world and not something people can control (see Smith 1989; O'Donnell 1998). Participants saw poverty as having always been part of life, and something that would always be present. While interviewees disliked the fact that so many Indians struggle below the poverty line, they did not believe that they or the government could change this situation. Hence, the naturalization of poverty is closely linked to a fatalistic and apathetic attitude among the middle class towards poverty in India.

The naturalizing of poverty by MCIs took different forms. Poverty was frequently referred to as being '*unsolvable*' or '*uncontrollable*', with almost all interviewees stating that extreme poverty would never be eradicated in India. The 'uncontrollable' nature of poverty was frequently alluded to in the language used by participants; poverty was cast as something one should protect oneself from, and not something one could affect or alter, much like natural phenomena. As one interviewee explained:

> *People come from other countries for a couple of weeks and they find the poverty shocking. Then they ask us why we don't feel shocked. The truth is we've become immune to it [poverty]. You have to become immune to it in the same way you have to become immune to the bad weather in the UK. You'd go crazy if you didn't.*
> (Businessperson, Ahmedabad)

Almost all respondents felt the country's large and growing population was the principal cause of poverty in India. This belief fuelled the scepticism about the possibility of poverty ever being eradicated and so fed into cynicism about the prospect of government policies significantly lowering poverty.

A view of poverty as natural contrasts with a historical understanding of poverty (Smith 1989). By naturalizing poverty, MCIs overlook the social and political processes that have produced and perpetuated poverty in India.[6] Hence, few saw issues of inequality or politics as underlying causes of poverty. One upshot was that while the majority of interviewees identified members of *Scheduled Castes* and *Scheduled Tribes* as having a greater likelihood of being poor, no respondent cited the caste system and its inherent inequalities as a cause of poverty.[7]

Political processes more generally were not identified as causes of poverty. While the majority of interviewees saw entrenched corruption in the country as a problem, it was not viewed as an underlying cause of poverty in itself. In rare cases when interviewees pointed to unequal power producing poverty in the country, this was, again, seen as inevitable – and linked to the notion of a natural order. This was demonstrated by the head of a small family-run manufacturing firm, who described how India's high growth had relied heavily on the supply of cheap and underpaid labour. This, he argued, had benefitted the wealthy at the expense of the poor. But in making this argument, the respondent was quick to distance himself from blaming the rich for the plight of the poor:

> *But I'm not against anybody, rich or poor. See, given the choice, if they [the poor] were in the position of the rich, they'd do exactly the same thing [as the rich]. So, I'm not against the rich or the poor, because… see, this is the jungle, I would say, and asking for equality and those things in the jungle is not possible. In the jungle, a rabbit cannot say, "the lion should not eat me because I am vegetarian." You cannot say that. So asking for equality or equal opportunities – all of that isn't possible here.* (Businessperson, Anand)

Others shared the perspective that unequal power, and its consequences, is the result of the natural order. This view was also demonstrated by references to Charles Darwin, and incorrectly associating explanations of inequality and poverty with Darwin's theory of evolution and natural selection (e.g. '*it's like Darwin said, "the powerful always keep the weak down"*' doctor, Vadodara).

The naturalization of poverty is strongly linked to the second key theme emerging from the interviews – the middle class emphasis on the role of individual effort in explaining how households move out of poverty. On the surface, these two themes appear somewhat contradictory. Social psychology studies of attributions of poverty have typically juxtaposed 'situational' attributions with 'dispositional' attributions, with the two seen as conflicting (see Harper 1996; Carr and Maclachlan 1998; Carr *et al.* 1998). However, Harper (2003: 193) has argued that 'natural' explanations of poverty 'have the flexibility to be used together with victim-blaming and other types of explanation.' The perceptions of MCIs certainly fit this description; despite poverty being seen as natural, there remains a strong emphasis on individual merit and behaviour in explaining why some people are poor, and others are not.

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6   See Mosse (2010) and Harriss-White (2006) on how such processes have produced poverty in India.

7   Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are historically disadvantaged groups recognised in the Indian Constitution. Borooah (2005) examines the relationship between caste inequalities and poverty.

Individualism

The interviews demonstrated a strong emphasis on individualism and behavioural factors in MCI explanations of how households move out of poverty. While others have discussed the individualism of the Indian middle class (e.g. Mishra 1995), its connection with perceptions of poverty and approaches to poverty alleviation has received little attention. A widespread belief among those interviewed is that the only way a household can come out of poverty is through the hard work and sacrifice of a member of that household. For example, following his statement that it is not possible to ask for equal opportunities in India, the businessperson quoted above immediately emphasized individual agency:

> Those that want to come out of it [poverty] – those that want bring themselves out of the bad situation they're in – they have to find that drive and determination inside themselves. They have to have something within them for that.
> (Businessperson, Anand)

This focus on individual effort and merit was a feature of all of the interviews. Respondents typically highlighted '*courage*', '*determination*', '*hard work*', and '*sacrifice*' as the key characteristics people need in order to move out of poverty. The emphasis on individual endeavour was further demonstrated by responses to the question of who was responsible for reducing poverty in India. While some saw it as the government's duty or that of society as a whole, the majority felt that responsibility for lowering poverty fell on the poor themselves. As one interviewee put it:

> The responsibility for reducing poverty basically lies with the person who is facing poverty. If a person has determination, then they'll come out of poverty. If they don't – and they just accept their poverty – then nobody can help them.
> (Education consultant, Vallabh Vidhyanagar)

This emphasis on individual responsibility is closely connected with a focus on the role of behavioural factors in explaining why some households have moved out of poverty and others have not. Participants, however, were eager to demonstrate that they were not inherently prejudiced against the poor. They did this by making comparisons between those currently in poverty with their own families' histories of moving out of poverty and examples of other poor families lifting themselves out of poverty. Respondents used these comparisons to show that their emphasis on the behaviour of the poor was 'objective' rather than rooted in any underlying biases against the poor.

The behavioural emphasis took two distinct perspectives. The first was more sympathetic, with respondents highlighting various social practices among poorer communities that kept them impoverished. In particular, the importance given to maintaining social networks and cultural practices by poor Indians was seen as a major obstacle. Interviewees explained that while such social networks were important to the poor because they provided security during emergencies, maintaining these networks was a major drain on the low incomes of poor people. Participants highlighted the large sums of money the poor spent on weddings, dowries, religious festivals, and loans to family members and friends – despite their lack of resources. Hence, the poor were seen as being caught in a poverty trap in which maintaining social networks was important for emergencies, yet preserving these networks prevented them saving enough to escape poverty.[8]

The second perspective was a more negative and critical view of the poor, which can aptly be described as 'victim-blaming' (Harper 2003). A number of respondents emphasized character flaws centred on the '*bad habits*' or '*mentality problems*' of the poor. A somewhat prevalent view was that those who remain poor tend to be lazy and unwilling to work (see also Prakash 2013). This perspective was particularly common among participants working in the manufacturing sector who hired labourers from the ranks of the poor. These respondents argued that plenty of jobs were available for those willing to work hard; therefore, those who remained in extreme poverty were those who 'chose' not to work. The bad habits of the poor were also seen as problematic; interviewees felt that poor people spent their money on alcohol, cigarettes, chewing tobacco and gambling, and this kept them impoverished.

This focus on poor people's behaviour was justified by drawing comparisons with their own families' experiences. It is important to note that the majority of India's middle class is 'first generation', as Kapur (2010: 155) explains, however, 'most analysis of the Indian middle class ignores this aspect', despite the implications for middle class attitudes and behaviour. Almost all of the interviewees could point to experiences of poverty in their own families over the past two generations. Typically, this experience was of transient rather than chronic poverty, with respondents describing specific periods of time when things were especially difficult for their parents or grandparents.[9]

Participants' families had faced several characteristics of poverty. These varied from more moderate but prolonged features of poverty, such as not being able to afford schoolbooks and new clothes when they were required, to more extreme forms of poverty, such as temporary food shortages.[10] A pervasive problem highlighted was insufficient access to health services

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8   These views echo recent research on poverty in India that draws on behavioural economics (e.g. Banerjee and Duflo 2011).

9   Older respondents (those in their 50s or older) described personal experiences of poverty, while younger respondents (those in their 20s and 30s) were aware of their parents and grandparents' experiences of poverty, though tended not to have experienced poverty themselves.

10   Older respondents described periods during their childhood where they remember their parents not eating meals to ensure that they and their siblings had enough to eat.

resulting in premature deaths among family and relatives, which respondents felt would today have been prevented. These premature deaths were particularly common among infants and women during childbirth.[11]

Participants were able to provide detailed accounts of parents and/or grandparents' experiences of poverty, and of how their families had managed to escape poverty. Such accounts were remarkably similar. They emphasized the sacrifice made by a 'heroic' individual – a parent or grandparent – who through their sacrifice and hard work ensured their children were able to receive a good education. This enabled their children to find well-paid jobs or to set up their own businesses, which meant the entire family – often including extended family members – achieved higher standards of living. This middle class narrative about their families' movement out of poverty formed the basis of a more general belief about the emergence of the new Indian middle class from poverty, as one participant described:

> In India, parental care is a very important factor for economic growth. Parents would not eat themselves, they would not take care of themselves, and they would not live their own lives. All so they could educate their sons and daughters – so that after they study, they will advance. Slowly, this is how change takes place in one family line[12] and they move out of poverty. (Businessperson, Vadodara)

Participants cited individual effort as the only factor in explaining how their families escaped poverty. This account of the rise of the new Indian middle class is analogous to the powerful narratives of the 'self-made man' in the US (Kogan 2013). Much like the Indian narratives of moving out of poverty, the notion of the self-made individual in the US is based on the view that 'such people attain their success through education, hard work and sheer willpower' (Kogan 2013: 3).[13] Both narratives ignore the role of broader structural factors, including government policies, in assisting individuals' economic progress.

Participants further justified an emphasis on individual effort with current examples of poor households slowly lifting themselves out of poverty. These examples were typically of domestic workers or street vendors known to participants. Interviewees provided detailed accounts of how these individuals worked hard and saved money to ensure their children received a good education. Respondents also cited examples reported in newspapers of students from very poor backgrounds who had performed exceptionally in school and university exams. Again, these were highlighted as positive examples of poor parents investing in their children's education. More generally, participants felt the most important recent change in India was that many poor parents now understood the importance of education:

> There are lots of examples of poor people moving up. They [the poor] want to educate their children now so that their children can get better jobs than they have, and have better lives than them. They understand the value of education, whereas before they didn't. Before, they thought their children should just do whatever work the parents did. If the parents were cleaners, then their children would also become cleaners. That was their attitude, but it's not the case anymore. That's the big improvement in India. (Financial advisor, Surat)

The above quote further demonstrates the unwavering belief among MCIs in the transformative potential of education. There was a unanimous view that policies that promoted education would have the biggest impact on promoting development in India. This, as I discuss below, meant that various government programs to provide education to the poor – including those that used incentives, such as free meals and cash transfers, to encourage poor households to send their children to school – were viewed in a very positive light.

This emphasis on education conforms to the broader middle class belief in meritocratic processes. Bhalla (2007) argues that the MCI belief in merit is a defining characteristic of the group, which is a view shared by participants. While the emphasis on merit is seen as key to the country's development, it also has a negative side. Combined with the naturalization of poverty, the emphasis on individual merit promotes a view that a person's poverty is a consequence of their lack of effort and ability. Structural constraints linked to poverty, such as politics, caste, gender and inequality, are ignored. This fosters an elitist view among MCIs of how poverty should be tackled. They tend to be more concerned with ensuring the most exceptional among the poor are provided with the opportunities to excel, rather than focusing more generally on eradicating poverty – which is seen as largely impossible.

This elitism was demonstrated by interviewees' examples of what they felt were 'excellent' poverty reduction initiatives, which typically targeted the most intelligent among the poor. In one example, an interviewee described a local NGO in Ahmedabad that went to poorer areas in the city, particularly slums, and conducted intelligence tests among poor children living there. The NGO paid the full costs for children who achieved exceptional scores to attend an elite boarding school in the city. A second example was of a large Indian corporation annually covering the costs of ten medical students from highly deprived backgrounds at the *Karamsad Medical College* in Anand, based on outstanding academic results.

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11 Older respondents provided examples of women in their immediate or extended families having died during child birth. They also described parents losing children at very young ages to various illnesses.

12 The respondent used the Gujarati word pedhi, a commonly used word in Gujarat, which translates slightly awkwardly as dynasty or family lineage.

13 The strong belief in the narrative of the self-made individual among India's middle class is reflected in popular culture trends. Articles in The Economist and Foreign Policy have described the huge popularity in India of Ayn Rand's novel, The Fountainhead, which, arguably, is the seminal fictional account of the heroic self-made individual (The Economist 2012; Burns 2009).

The government and class politics

The interviews suggest middle class attitudes to poverty are inseparable from attitudes towards the government, and perceptions of the relationship between the government and the poor in India. While MCI attitudes towards the government and politicians were highly negative, almost all of the interviewees felt that the government did a lot for the poor. These views are linked to class politics in India, and the middle class seeing itself as isolated, particularly due to the strong alliance between the poor and the country's 'political class'.

The negative view of governments – both at national and state level – forms part of a broader middle class disdain for politics and politicians in India. Politicians were unanimously described as '*criminals*' or of being '*dirty*', which is, perhaps, not surprising, given around a third of the country's current MPs have criminal cases pending against them (North 2013). The strong dislike for politics is linked to the widespread belief that corruption is endemic to politics in India. Indeed, Transparency International (2012) finds that political parties are seen as the most corrupt institution in the country.[14] One participant stated:

> The government is completely corrupt. There is no chance of improvement. Here people say, "Cancer can be treated, but not corruption." That's the situation in India right now. (Engineer, Rajpipla)

It is also worth noting interviewees tended to imply that corruption was a problem afflicting the middle class in India more than other groups. This, according to MCIs, is because they have money, but a relative lack of power – and therefore could be targeted by public officials to pay bribes.

Despite generally negative views of the government, a prevalent belief among the middle class is that the government does much to help the poor. While corruption was seen as a problem, participants felt that '*if a small amount of what the government does actually reaches the poor, this is still very positive*' (lecturer, Anand). Respondents detailed various schemes aimed at assisting the poor, both at the national and state level, to demonstrate how much the government does for the poor. This knowledge of specific initiatives was somewhat surprising, given generally low levels of knowledge about poverty among MCIs, and appears to be due to the extensive media coverage of government initiatives for the poor. Those I spoke to frequently referenced various newspaper articles when discussing government efforts to tackle poverty.

The question of why the government did so much for the poor produced a unanimous response; the government had to, because politicians rely heavily on poor people's votes to get elected and remain in power. As one respondent explained, this means '*in India, the poor are the politically favoured class*' (businessperson, Vadodara). Participants frequently referred to '*vote bank politics*' in describing the relationship between politicians and the poor, whereby the former were seen to '*buy*' poor votes by providing them with greater transfers of public resources (see Schindler 2013). The middle class view of governance in India, therefore, reflects Guha's (2007) description of India as a 'populist' democracy.

Most MCIs felt this populism produced greater government responsiveness to the needs of the poor, which had led to some improvements in the lives of India's poor. Participants, however, made a distinction between two broad categories of government response. The first included various education and employment schemes. Examples included government initiatives to provide basic education to children in poor rural areas, where free meals were also provided as an incentive for poor parents to send their children to school, and to tend to children's nutritional requirements. Another example was a government scheme providing poor people in Gujarat with employment for a fixed number of days each month as labourers on the state's highway system. MCIs strongly supported such initiatives.

The second category participants identified was specific welfare measures and direct transfers for the poor, which were viewed unfavourably, and cited as examples of 'vote-buying'.[15] The negative view of direct transfers reflects the framing of such policies in media sources. For example, during one interview, a respondent raised the issue of '*vote bank politics*' in India by pointing to coverage of a national government scheme to provide poor people in rural areas with free mobile phones on the front page of the newspaper, *Times of India*, with the headline 'UPA set to rain poll freebies' (Sinha 2013).[16] Such 'freebies' were seen to have a detrimental impact on the poor through reducing incentives to work.[17]

Another contentious area of government policy towards the poor, participants highlighted, was the use of affirmative action or 'reservation' policies, based on legal quotas in education and government jobs for those coming from historically disadvantaged castes.[18] While some felt such policies had, in the past, been positive by providing opportunities for poorer households, most respondents opposed the continued use of caste-based quotas because it ignored poverty among those from other castes, and undermined meritocratic processes. A recurrent argument was that if affirmative action really was intended to

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14   Transparency International (2012) reports findings about perceptions of corruption among Indians generally. However, given the survey was conducted via telephone in urban areas, the perceptions are likely to be those of MCIs rather than poorer Indians.

15   Participants broadly supported basic food and health provisions, but saw other direct transfers as negative.

16   UPA refers to the United Progressive Alliance, the Congress Party-led coalition, which formed the national government between 2004 and 2014 elections, and was in power when the interviews were conducted.

17   Kalebe-Nyamongo and Marquette (2014) find a similar negative view of transfers to the poor is prevalent among Malawi's elite.

18   Louis (2003) provides an overview of the debate on affirmative action in India.

help the poor, then it should be means-tested and not based on an individual's caste. The continued emphasis on caste-based quotes was seen as another sign of populism, whereby politicians relied on support from Scheduled Castes.

The belief that the government provided extensive assistance to the poor, but little or nothing to help the middle class, was seen by some to justify middle class disengagement with the issue of poverty:

> Let me tell you why the middle class aren't that concerned about the poor in India. The government doesn't help the middle class at all, but it gives a lot to the poor; so naturally, the middle class thinks, "the government will take care of you [the poor]… we need to work hard ourselves if we're to get anything. We don't get anything from the government or anywhere." And the middle class aren't that well off here. If the government policies and laws were fair – the same for everyone – then this problem wouldn't arise. The government has divided them [the middle class and the poor]. (Homemaker, Vadodara)

This frustration expressed by several participants went beyond the relationship between the government and the poor, to being more generally directed at class politics in the country. Interviewees generally saw people falling into four broad classes in India: the rich – or 'super-rich' elites, the political class, the middle class, and the poor. A further distinction was made between 'upper' and 'lower' middle classes. Those that saw themselves as lower middle class, felt the upper middle class were closer to the rich elite in their behaviour and attitudes.

A prevalent view, particularly among those working in family-run companies, is that the super-elites, which included CEOs of Indian-based multinational corporations, were able to control the political class to further their own interests.[19] As a younger interviewee in Ahmedabad described, using the example of the Reliance corporation:

> The problem in India is also the really wealthy – the elite. Reliance basically runs the country, or at least they try to. The government just does what they say. The government makes sure that they [Reliance] are protected, so they have a monopoly. They stop new companies entering the market here. (Businessperson, Ahmedabad)

The implication is that the 'new companies' are those run by middle class families. Interviewees described specific cases where large Indian companies were seen to use illicit means to prevent a new company from competing, while being protected by the government.

The interviews reveal that MCIs view politicians and senior bureaucrats as a distinct class in society. The notion of a separate 'political class' reflects the disconnect the middle class feels towards politics in the country. This is partly a consequence of the unwillingness of MCIs to enter politics, because Indian politics is viewed as being so dirty that one cannot be a part of it without tainting oneself:

> We [the middle class] should put others in their [politicians'] place, but good people don't want to go into politics. If someone is living a good life, and you were to tell them to go into politics, they would say, "No, I don't want to go into that filth". Why would they go? (Businessperson, Vadodara)

Even if MCIs are willing to enter the 'filth' of Indian politics, participants felt they would be prevented from doing so by members of the political class. Entry into formal politics was seen to require family connections or some level of celebrity, which most MCIs do not have. Subsequently, interviewees felt their views and interests are largely unrepresented in Indian politics, fuelling disenchantment with the political process.

Middle class disengagement with India's democratic politics is noted by a number of scholars (for instance, Kapur 2010), and the analysis suggests this broader political disengagement is closely connected to a lack of middle class concern for the poor. Yet the MCI perception, reported by this study's participants, of government populism in responding to the poor, of a corrupt political class controlled by the country's biggest corporations, and the belief that the government does little to help the country's 'hard-working' middle class, all enable the middle class to view itself as the 'underdogs of society' (Dréze and Sen 2013: 286).

Lessons for understanding the politics of poverty reduction

In this section, I discuss the implications of the analysis of middle class Indian attitudes to poverty. Specifically, I consider what broad lessons the findings offer for better understanding the politics of poverty reduction. There are four important and related lessons that can be drawn from the findings and these are used to highlight limitations in existing approaches to the politics of development.

1 Poverty is often a significant and sensitive issue in politics in developing countries

The role of politics in producing and reducing poverty is widely acknowledged. However, there is less recognition of the significance of the issue of poverty in the politics of developing countries. Generally, there is a view that poverty is altogether excluded from the political agenda in developing countries because the poor lack power and influence (e.g. Mosse 2010). Though this may be true in many contexts, the analysis here suggests poverty is high on the political agenda in India. The

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19   Respondents typically cited the examples of Reliance and Tata, two of the largest corporations in India, when discussing multinational corporations.

failure to adequately tackle poverty in the country appears to be more related to *how* poverty is publicly framed and discussed, which in turn affects *how* it is incorporated into the political agenda, and shapes the design and implementation of pro-poor policies.

The analysis of MCI attitudes to poverty demonstrates the highly politicized nature of poverty and strategies to tackle poverty in developing countries, particularly as MCIs view poverty through the lens of class politics. From this perspective, the poor are not seen as powerless and marginalised, as is typically the view among development researchers and practitioners. Instead, the poor – somewhat paradoxically – are seen to have significant influence in society through their close ties to politicians who need their votes to remain in power. This is in sharp contrast to how MCIs perceive the position of the middle class in the country and its lack of political influence.

Because of this, initiatives introduced to tackle poverty in the country are seen as populist measures introduced by political leaders seeking votes from the poor. This is particularly the case for initiatives involving direct transfers to the poor, which are perceived as reducing incentives to work. This negative view of redistributive measures is reinforced by the belief that poverty will never fully be eradicated, and that those that manage to move out of poverty do so through their own efforts and not through government assistance.

It is important to note the long history of political campaigning in India on the theme of reducing or ending poverty. The most well-known example is Indira Gandhi's campaign slogan of '*garibi hatao*' ('abolish poverty') which brought her a landslide victory in the 1971 national elections. It has since been associated with the failure of government initiatives to tackle poverty (Brass 1990). The frequent use of populist slogans around eradicating poverty in India and the failure of numerous poverty reduction programmes has contributed to the cynicism MCIs express about government initiatives to reduce poverty (Melo *et al.* 2012).

The main upshot of the politicized nature of poverty is that politicians need to carefully consider the political implications of publicly introducing initiatives to tackle poverty. While such policies may gain favour with poorer constituents, there is a real risk of alienating the growing number of middle class voters in the country. The recognition by politicians of this dilemma is demonstrated in Melo *et al.'s* (2012) discussion of how Digvijay Singh, the Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh implemented a series of pro-poor initiatives, while avoiding references to 'poverty' in his public statements. This was, in part, because he felt that the highly politicized nature of the term 'poverty' risked alienating the non-poor. Instead he emphasized 'development' in public speeches.

2 Better engagement with the politics of policy design and implementation is required

A consequence of the highly politicized nature of poverty in developing countries is that the politics of policy design and implementation need to be carefully considered. In other words, it is not sufficient to focus exclusively on the impact policies may have on poverty. It is also necessary to consider: who is likely to be impacted negatively or positively by the implementation of a policy; which policies are likely to be broadly supported by different groups and which will be opposed; what actions can be taken to reduce opposition to a policy and mobilise supporters; and how policies and policy problems can be presented to the public in ways that reduce opposition and generate support (Grindle 2004).

The analysis points to areas where attention to the politics of policy design may be fruitful. For example, the interviews suggest initiatives that seek to tackle corruption are likely to be supported by the middle classes and benefit the poor. As noted previously, MCIs see themselves as the principal victims of political corruption.[20] The analysis also indicates that the middle class are more likely to support policies promoting education and employment for the poor than policies providing welfare or direct transfers, given the focus on individual effort and merit.

The greater support for education and employment policies over welfare policies has further implications for designing pro-poor policies, such as cash transfers. The recent introduction of unconditional cash transfers targeting the poor in India has met with significant opposition from the middle class (Harris 2013). The analysis here suggests that cash transfers conditional on school attendance are likely to meet less resistance (see Graham 2002; Kalebe-Nyamongo and Marquette 2014).

Therefore, better engagement with the politics of policy design and implementation could potentially have a substantial impact on whether poverty reduction initiatives are supported or opposed. This, in turn, has implications for government willingness to implement such policies. Yet, the politics of policy design is an area that has generally been neglected in development research and policy.[21] In contrast, the importance of how policies are framed and presented to the public has received much attention in the broader, 'non-development', public policy literature (e.g. Fischer 2003: 12; Anderson 1978; Stone 2002).

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20   This strong middle class support for anti-corruption measures is demonstrated by the recent drive to tackle corruption coming predominantly from the middle class, resulting in the introduction of a major anti-corruption bill (Burke 2013).

21   Notable exceptions include Grindle (1980, 2004), Ascher (1984), and Melo *et al.* (2012).

3 More attention needs to be given to ideas, values, and narratives, and how they influence preferences

The importance of how policies are presented to the public raises a broader issue, namely the influence of ideas, values, and narratives in society. As noted previously, the recent political turn in development has largely ignored the role of ideas, instead focusing almost exclusively on self-interest. This emphasis on self-interest alone explains in part why the development community has paid little attention to the middle classes in developing countries. As Birdsall (2010: 3) states, the prevailing assumption is that the middle class 'competes with the poor politically and economically – preferring to enhance its own access to state jobs and spending, and to preserve its limited privileges'.

By ignoring the middle classes of developing countries on the basis of this assumption, the development community frames the interaction between the middle class and the poor as something of a Manichean struggle. This framing treats middle class interests as singular, unproblematic, and fixed, and ignores the role of ideas and values in shaping preferences. However, the relationship between interests, ideas, and preferences is more complex than this. As Rodrik (2014) explains, the relationship between interests and preferences is dependent on individuals' ideas; specifically, how actors define themselves, their idea of how the world works, and what they believe can be done in a given situation.

The analysis demonstrates the importance of ideas in shaping preferences. Focusing only on self-interest and the capture of state spending does not explain why MCIs strongly support more government spending on education initiatives for the poor, but oppose direct transfers. Nor does it tell us why welfare measures generally opposed by MCIs are supported if they are part of a broader education or employment scheme. It reveals little about why MCIs express support for affirmative action in education and government jobs based on means-testing, but oppose caste-based affirmative action – despite being less likely to benefit from the former. More broadly, the analysis demonstrates how the strong middle class narrative about how households move out of poverty informs the view that escape from poverty is down to individual effort. This, in turn, shapes support for different initiatives to tackle poverty.

Engaging with ideas can help to identify the policies, and the framing of policies, likely to be supported. It can also help to suggest areas that policymakers and other reformists may need to confront and challenge in public debate. Furthermore, it can help to identify new actors in a society who may be key in bringing about change through their influence on the ideas, for example, promoted through the media. This, again, is an area that has received significant attention outside of development research. The public policy literature has, in particular, emphasized the role of ideas in societies, based on an understanding that 'the struggle over ideas' lies at the heart of policymaking (Stone 2002: 11; Rein 1976; Hall 1989; Hochschild 2006).

4 A better understanding of the drivers of disengagement with poverty is needed for building broader coalitions of change

The issue of public engagement and disengagement with poverty in developing countries has largely been overlooked in development research and policy. This is in sharp contrast to the growing attention given to public engagement with global poverty and development in wealthy nations, which is driven by the recognition that public engagement is necessary to give governments and NGOs the legitimacy to provide development assistance (see Smillie 1996; van Heerde and Hudson 2010; Darnton and Kirk 2011).

Public engagement with poverty is important in developing countries for very similar reasons. Recent studies have increasingly found that developmental reforms cannot be implemented from the outside; change requires broad-based coalitions within societies to be mobilized (see Andrews 2013; Grindle 2004; Melo *et al.* 2012; Andrews 2013; Levy 2014; Fabella *et al.* 2014). This is only possible if different groups in society are engaged with development issues, and so understanding the drivers of engagement and disengagement is crucial.

The analysis suggests that there are different factors that contribute to middle class disengagement with the issue of poverty in India. This includes the belief that poverty is natural and unsolvable, the view that individual endeavour and merit explains how households move out of poverty, and the broader disengagement with politics in the country. It is also likely to be closely related to middle class Indians' worries about their own economic security.

The question of how to change attitudes and re-engage the Indian middle class with the issue of poverty is beyond the scope of this study. However, if policymaking in India is to better target poverty reduction, then understanding the drivers of middle class disengagement is a fundamental issue. Given the growing middle class across the developing world, it is a question that, more generally, requires greater research and policy attention.

Conclusion

This paper has considered how 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. Specifically, the study has considered the attitudes of middle class Indians to poverty and identified a number of key themes. MCIs tend to view poverty as natural and inevitable, explanations for why some households move out of poverty tend to focus on individual endeavour and merit, and middle class disengagement with poverty is linked to a broader issue of disengagement with politics. Given the absence of research that empirically examines middle class Indians' attitudes to poverty, the analysis conducted here provides an important and much-needed entry point into this subject for future research to build upon.

Based on the analysis, the paper has identified some broad principles for understanding the politics of poverty reduction. These include: a need to give greater consideration to the politics of policy design and implementation; the need to pay closer attention to the role of ideas, values, and narratives in considering the politics of developmental change; and the need to consider drivers of disengagement with poverty in developing countries. In highlighting these areas, the paper also identifies new avenues for future research on how political processes shape development trajectories. These avenues move us beyond the current explanations of development failure that focus on political institutions towards a better understanding of how change happens.

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