National Poverty and Global Poverty in the Age of Neoliberalism

Pauvreté nationale et pauvreté mondiale dans l'âge du néolibéralisme

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National Poverty and Global Poverty in the Age of Neoliberalism

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Akhil Gupta

- 1 Why has the Indian state whose proclaimed motive is to foster development failed to help the large number of people who still live in dire poverty? Why do regimes whose legitimacy depends upon improving the lives of the poor continue to allow anywhere from 250 million to 427 million to live below the poverty line? Another way to frame this question is to ask: After almost sixty years of development efforts by the postcolonial state, why do so many of India's citizens continue to be subjected to the cruelties of endemic hunger and malnutrition and the deprivation of basic necessities such as clothing, shelter, clean water, and sanitation?
- 2 Despite being the world's fourth largest economy, India ranks extremely low on the Human Development Index (126th among 177 nation-states). Since 1991, India has settled into a period of liberalization, and GDP growth rate have shot up (9.2% in 2006, and between 6 and 8% in the last two decades), and there have been sharp reductions in the number of people living below the poverty line (from just a bit more than 50% in 1977-1978 to less than 23% in 2004-2005). Given this improvement, does not continuing the emphasis on poverty, rather than on the considerable achievements that have been made in other spheres, simply perpetuate the clichéd image of India as a poverty-stricken land? Rather than dismiss such objections, I acknowledge that there is much truth to them. However, for reasons that will become evident below, I insist that the life-denying consequences of chronic poverty, far from receiving too much attention, have in fact largely disappeared from public discussion.
- 3 Using a very crude calculation, I estimate that the number of "excess deaths"—the number of people missing from the population due to malnutrition and morbidity—is approximately 140 million. This translates to over 2 million untimely deaths annually, a figure that overshadows the loss of human life due to all natural disasters globally (Calhoun 2004: 382). Nevertheless, the system of checks and balances composed of the free press, and the democratic, multi-party, competitive political system that, as

Amartya Sen (1999: 180-182) claims, has been so effective in sounding the alarm of impending famine, drought, or natural disaster, has failed to mobilize state and private resources to prevent a disaster of these proportions.

- 4 I am concerned, in other words, with what should be considered exceptional, a tragedy and disgrace, but is not: the invisible forms of violence that result in the deaths of millions of poor, especially women, girls, lower-caste people, and indigenous people. How does one think about not only deliberate acts of violence such as police brutality, but also political, administrative, and judicial (in)action that prevents poor people from making a living, obtaining medical aid, or securing the necessities of life in the form of food, clothing, shelter, and sanitation? Why is faster and more effective (state) intervention not forthcoming to relieve the suffering of millions of the poorest and most disempowered?
- 5 Engaging the work of Foucault and Agamben, I argue that extreme poverty needs to be theorized as a direct and culpable form of killing that is made possible by state policies and practices rather than as an inevitable situation in which the poor are merely “allowed to die” or “exposed to death”. Seeing the death of the poor as a form of thanatopolitics enables several important interventions. First, it draws attention to the fact that such deaths are not inevitable: far from it, despite being preventable, they are not prevented. This is where the contrast with natural disasters is so clear: if the poor were equated to victims of a natural disaster, the urgency displayed in ameliorating their situation and the scale of intervention employed would be of a completely different magnitude. Similarly, if one compares the complacency towards endemic poverty with the impatience displayed towards impediments to growth and accumulation, the difference is striking. How does one account for the enormous difference in the Indian state’s response to poverty on the one hand, and natural disaster and liberalization on the other?
- 6 The usual answer to this question is to suggest that it must be because the poor are excluded from national projects of development, democratic politics, or cultural citizenship. Agamben (2005) suggests that exclusion is the basis for violence in states of exception. Contra Agamben, and this is my second major point, the paradox of the violence of poverty in India is that the poor are killed despite their inclusion in projects of national sovereignty and despite their centrality to democratic politics and state legitimacy.
- 7 In the next section, I grapple with this paradox by interrogating the work of Foucault and Agamben. I demonstrate why the Foucauldian idea of “biopower” is critical in the normalization of high rates of poverty; at the same time, however, I argue that “biopower” is insufficient in describing the violence of poverty, and I find Agamben’s discussion of bare life to be useful in dealing with such violence. In the following section, I go beyond the Indian case to document the rise of a discourse of global poverty. I then ask how one explains the rise of such a discourse. Why did it arise at all, and especially why did it arise at that particular time? Another, more Foucauldian, question is: What are its effects on the poor? The last section advances some anthropological critiques of the discourse of global poverty. I should clarify that when I speak of the “discourse of global poverty”, I refer to not only speeches and writings in which such ideas circulate, but also to institutions, policies, and programs where they are materialized.

Biopolitics, Bare Life, and Legitimate Violence

- 8 Two features are essential to any understanding of the relation between the state in India and the poor: firstly, that the task of caring for the population is taken seriously and carried out well beyond a utilitarian calculus; and secondly, that despite this, the poor are exposed to death on an ongoing basis without cause for alarm. How is this seemingly contradictory state of affairs to be understood?
- 9 One possible answer emerges from the connections Foucault (1990, 2003, 2007) makes between normalization and mortality in his concept of biopower or biopolitics. In charting the shift from disciplinary technologies to biopower, Foucault argues that what changes with biopower is that the control of individual bodies is complemented by a focus on the population as a whole. Thus, “objects” like the birth rate, and the rate of mortality and morbidity come into a calculus of planning and control. For my purposes, the most important point about this argument is that the “normal” is discovered through the statistical analysis of the population and comes to be established as a norm. Statistical regularity, then, helps establish the prescriptive (*ibid.* 2003: 253, 2007).
- 10 In the Indian case, high rates of poverty, once established as a statistical “fact” and the “normal” state of affairs then serve to justify and legitimate indifference on the part of state elites, particularly since there was not much change in rates of poverty in the first five decades after Independence.
- 11 If one were to draw an analogy with India’s rates of economic growth, in the decades after Independence, the “normal” rate of around 3.5% became so much an established fact that there was consternation only if the economy failed to reach that number. When liberalization was first introduced in the early 1990s, proponents argued that a change in policy, in order to be effective, had to be accompanied by a different “mindset” that believed that rates of growth of 6-8% were possible in India. Promoters of liberalization such as the previous Finance Minister Chidambaram claim that one of its enduring achievements is that the “norm” has shifted so significantly that these rates of growth are now expected and people ask why India cannot do even better (BBC 2007).
- 12 Comparing such an optimistic discourse with the one applied to acute poverty makes for a striking contrast. Chidambaram exemplifies this contrast in an interview with the BBC: “The faster we grow and the more inclusive that growth is, the decline in poverty will be rapid. I’m confident we can wipe out poverty by 2040.” The interviewer, incredulous, asks him what he means by “wiping out poverty”. Chidambaram replied, “People will have homes, work, food, clothing, access to education and medical care” (*ibid.*).
- 13 I think it is worth pausing here, keeping the low life expectancies of the very poor in mind, to ask why a plan to eradicate poverty that essentially sacrifices an entire generation is considered to be a positive aspiration (and one does not know how much of this will translate into actual achievement). By the time the Indian government plans to wipe out poverty, very few of the poorest people living today will still be alive. Such a statement makes sense to speakers and listeners alike only against a backdrop in which high rates of poverty are taken as normal. In other words, it makes sense as biopolitics.

- 14 As a concept, biopower does not help us explain why some people in dire poverty receive help while others do not. Another criticism of the idea of biopower is that in emphasizing managerial approaches to the population, it fails to address adequately questions of violence. If managing the population perpetrates violence on the poor, how different is the form of implicit violence in biopower from other types of violence? It would be fair to say that the implicit violence in biopower remains under-theorized in Foucault's work.
- 15 Agamben introduces an important shift from the Foucauldian idea of biopower by making the distinction between "being killed" as opposed to passively "being allowed to die". The protagonist of *homo sacer* and State of Exception is the person who can be killed without sacrifice, a person who is expendable. Are cases in which people deliberately ignore the acute distress of others acts of violence?
- 16 The inevitability of the death of the poor attains a different ethical complexion if the violence in such a than atopolitics is seen as "killing" rather than simply as "allowing to die" or "exposing to death". Agamben (1998: 8) constructs the figure of the *homo sacer* as a person inside and outside the law, who can be killed but whose killing does not violate either the law or the legitimacy of the sovereign. The extremely poor could be a perfect example of what Agamben means by *homo sacer* in that their death is not recognized as a violation in any respect: not a violation of a norm, a rule, a law, a constitutional principle, not even perhaps of the idea of justice. Does not providing food, clothing, shelter, and healthcare to someone who is obviously in dire need represent "killing?". If so, it is important to note that nobody is punished or punishable for taking these lives. Because such deaths are outside the orbit of violation, punishment, and restitution, they represent life that can be killed without being considered a sacrifice—exactly what Agamben means by "sacred life".
- 17 Useful as Agamben's idea of "bare life" is for understanding the plight of the very poor in India, the integral connection between the state of exception and the production of bare life is much less persuasive. One reason could be that for Agamben, the state of exception depends on a "strong" theory of sovereignty and a powerfully unified state apparatus (Redfield 2005: 340; Hansen & Stepputat 2006). From Carl Schmitt, Agamben (2005: 1) takes the definition of the sovereign to be the one "who decides on the state of exception". If, by contrast, one considers a situation characterized by fragmented, dispersed, or overlapping sovereignties, and a state that is pluricentered, multileveled, and decentralized, it becomes much harder to mobilize the theoretical dualisms that characterize Agamben's relationship between the state of exception and bare life.
- 18 The poor in India are not excluded from political participation; in fact, they are enthusiastic practitioners of participatory democracy at different levels of politics. Of the two million people elected to various offices by democratic methods in India, the poor constitute a significant number. The failure of the benefits of development to reach them cannot be attributed solely to their exclusion from political community constituted by identities such as nation, religion, or caste (Agamben 1998: 181). On the other hand, despite their inclusion in the national community and the development state, their poverty does not constitute a scandal, and their death does not provoke national soul-searching. Popular sovereignty takes the paradoxical form of inclusion and unspeakable violence; forms of belonging co-exist with the production of bare life. What begs explanation in our case is the widespread acceptance of the violence

being done to the poor in postcolonial India at the same time that popular sovereignty is constituted through them.

- 19 In the recent past, one of the most striking features of discourses of poverty is the emphasis on poverty as a global phenomenon. As I demonstrate below, there has been a discernable new discourse of “global poverty” whose timing and visibility in an age of neoliberalism needs explanation. While this discourse does not get away from seeing poverty in national terms, it does suggest that “solutions” to poverty will have to come from international sources, and, at the very least, seems to suggest a new “global” awareness of the problem of poverty.

The Poor on the Policy Agenda

- 20 Since the late 1990s, poverty has once again become an important part of the international agenda. However, what has come to prominence is not just poverty *per se*, but a specific discourse on “global poverty”. If we, somewhat unscientifically, chart the number of publications in which the term “global poverty” is employed, we find its use accelerating after 1999, and registering an almost 500% increase from then till 2005. The new consensus on global poverty culminated in the United Nations Millennium Declaration (September 2000).
- 21 This growing attention to global poverty is unquestionably a positive development. However, it does raise a number of analytical issues. What are the origins of this sudden interest in “global poverty”? How is it to be explained? Why did it arise at that particular historical juncture? And what effects does it have on global institutions, nation-states in the North and South, and most importantly, on poor people in different parts of the world?
- 22 In order to understand the ascendance of the poor on the policy agenda, we must rule out the conveniently available explanation which says that growing interest in global poverty is due to a sharp increase in the number or proportion of people in absolute poverty. These numbers show a steady decline. The number of those living under \$1/day fell from 1.47 billion people in 1981 to 969 million in 2004; as a percentage of the world’s population, the decline has been even more dramatic, falling from 40% in 1981 to only 18% in 2004 (Chen & Ravallion 2007: 21, table 1).
- 23 Instead of an increase in absolute poverty, a series of other convergences may help explain the growing interest in the problem of “global poverty”. One set of explanations can be found in proximate political and economic events (Kanbur 2001: 1083; Noël 2006: 313, 318-319): protests organized by “global civil society”; the rise of social-democratic governments in the major European countries; the East Asian crisis of 1997 which provoked rethinking about the wisdom of implementing structural adjustments in countries with large populations of poor people; and, internal disagreements and differences between and within multilateral institutions (the World Bank and the IMF, allied to US executive power, supporting the “Washington consensus” on one side, wings of the United Nations that deal with social issues such as UNICEF, UNDP, and the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development on the other). Another possible explanation for the newfound visibility of the poor may have to do with the consequences of neoliberal globalization for inequality, as neo-liberalism has contributed to a massive redistribution of wealth upward (Harvey 2005: 9-19). Finally, we must mention the tremendous impact of a group of influential thinkers who have

emerged as advocates for the poor (Jeffrey Sachs, Amartya Sen, Peter Singer, and Paul Collier, to name just a few). However, no matter how insightful such thinkers have been, they would not have had much impact without conditions being favorable for the reception of their ideas. I will now argue that the timing and visibility of the discourse on “global poverty” is also related to recent transformations of neo-liberalism.

Neoliberalism and Global Poverty

- 24 The chief institutional mechanism by which this renewed emphasis on poverty has been implemented is through a “new Washington consensus” forged in late 1999 by the World Bank and the IMF, namely the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs). The PRSPs are country-driven, result oriented strategies that bring national development plans in line with neoliberal globalization by emphasizing growth, free markets, and an open economy (Craig & Porter 2003: 53; Weber 2004: 197). However, they differ from structural adjustment in emphasizing that growth needs to be broad-based, that good governance, decentralization, and empowerment are critical, that investments in health, education, and human capital are desirable, and that social protection is necessary for those adversely impacted by adjustment processes.
- 25 Therefore, it is possible to read them as a “Third Way” solution to harmonize economies in the global South to neoliberal globalization but without completely disregarding the human costs of such “adjustment”. In this view, the renewed interest in poverty exhibited by the coordinated actions of the World Bank and the IMF on PRSPs is really about inventing a new form of governance to control the Third World and to prevent the rise of other social and political alternatives (Weber 2004). Taking a broader perspective, Sindzingre (2004: 176) argues that the wholesale focus on poverty is politically regressive because it displaces concerns with global inequality, and postpones a real discussion of development.
- 26 For Noël (2006: 322), the rhetoric of global poverty has been adopted as a cynical means to legitimize neoliberal globalization. In this view, the importance of global poverty in the statements of multilateral organizations, G-8 nation-states, and other global economic elites, is an effort either to conceal the real agenda of structural change, or to sugar coat it so that it appears more politically palatable. Craig and Porter (2003: 54) argue that the logic of the PRSPs is clear: “Global economic integration first, good governance second, poverty reduction following as a result, underpinned by limited safety nets and human capital development.” In this view, poverty reduction lies at the margins of a global agenda aimed at a particularly unequal vision of economic integration (Noël 2006: 323).
- 27 I wish to add a few other critiques that interrogate the concept of “global poverty”. What does it mean to speak of global poverty? In what sense is poverty global and what implications does formulating poverty in these terms have for the kinds of solutions that are proposed to eradicate it?

Thinking Contextually About Poverty

- 28 We could talk about poverty as being “global” in two ways. The first manner in which that term is employed is to indicate a class of people (for instance, those who live on less than \$1/ day). The second way in which we could think about it is to indicate the

structural and institutional mechanisms that operate on a global scale that create poverty. In this meaning, “global poverty” would point to that aspect of poverty that could be traced to the actions of global institutions and global structures.

- 29 The problem with the first definition—the usual way in which global poverty is defined—is that it posits, if only implicitly, that there is some reason to include all poor people into one category. Counting the poor is certainly an important reason for defining poverty in this way. However, once defined in this manner, the concept of “global poverty” favors a context-free, or at least contextually thin, understanding of poverty. It looks for unitary explanations and for universalistic solutions (more complete markets, empowerment, participation, transparency, decentralization, etc.). The goal is to find what works in a particular local setting, and then “scale up” to other settings. This is a fundamental premise of major development institutions, whether it is the World Bank, national governments, or transnational NGOs.
- 30 From an anthropological viewpoint, one should press for a way of thinking about poverty that first considers the meaning of poverty for the people who experience it before attempting to find solutions. Indeed the actions of the poor as social agents depend on what poverty means to them. We know from the study of famines that even when people are dying of starvation, they make culturally and socially significant distinctions in order to decide what kinds of food are edible, and who gets to eat whatever little food is available, and in what order (Greenough 1982; Sen 1983). Even under the most extreme conditions, the assumption that certain goods are vital—in the sense of being “beyond” meaning—represents a faulty premise.
- 31 We can broach the broader point about context dependence by pointing to three important issues. First, without understanding how the poor understand their own existential situation, we cannot have meaningful solutions to poverty. Even indices for the measurement of poverty, such as the \$1/day income measure, fail to ask what those income measures might mean to the people who are so classified. Although people whose income is below \$1/day might be classed as “the poor”, they may find that they have little in common with each other.
- 32 Secondly, by a contextually specific understanding of poverty, I am not making a classic anthropological case for “the local” (hence for a smaller scale). What I am arguing is for a specific theory of the articulation of structures that are global, national, regional, and local. Even if global and national structures are identical, we may need different solutions for different regional and social contexts. I am proposing that “solutions” to poverty will necessarily need to vary by geographical location, and by gender, caste, ethnicity, religion, etc. My argument for complexity and non-reducibility is no doubt a frustrating conclusion to social engineers who wish to find “broadly applicable” solutions. Nevertheless, it is the only logical outcome that follows from taking seriously the mantras of decentralization, participation, and empowerment.
- 33 Such contextually dependent understandings of poverty acknowledge the role of historically enmeshed inequalities in creating poverty for certain social groups in a particular region. A one-size-fits-all approach, scaled up from another setting, might increase inequalities, or push more people into poverty than an approach tailored for a specific place (Gupta 2010).
- 34 The ideological shifts that made neoliberalism and market triumphalism possible also meant that the critique of global and national inequality could no longer be articulated

with any conviction in the public sphere. Once the relation between poverty and inequality had been sundered, the only way to deal with the non-vanishing problem of extremely poor people was through an ethical discourse grounded in human rights. In this sense, “global poverty” as the term has been used here could only emerge as a problem once the critique of capitalism as a generator of global inequality and extreme poverty was no longer tenable.

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- 36 In a forthcoming book, Anirudh Krishna formulates a critique of certain aspects of anti-poverty policies that are built on the premise that poverty is a stock rather than a flow. Policy “solutions” are aimed at lifting those below the poverty line out of poverty, yet the success of these solutions would be far greater if they prevented people who are not poor from becoming poor. It is rather ironic to see that the search for invariant solutions towards poverty alleviation leads to a distancing from the very features that are most responsible for global poverty, namely historically grounded inequalities, asymmetries of power, and the inability for the poor to access global labor and commodity markets. In focusing resolutely on *national* poverty eradication plans, the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) do not address the fact that the elimination of global institutional and economic inequalities may help the poor more than any action taken at a national or local level. The removal of agricultural subsidies for US and European farmers (including the subsidies for irrigation), the internalization of pollution costs (caused by vehicle emissions and other factors that contribute to global warming), and the elimination of some of the restrictive aspects of TRIPS Agreement (that keep the price of medication prohibitively high) would contribute to change the structural factors that lie at the root of poverty far more than the “scaling up” of micro-credit. Yet the focus of “development” institutions and expert knowledge continues to be on the latter type of solutions. If there are invariant conditions that contribute to global poverty, they are likely to be found in the structures of global institutional arrangements, such as agricultural subsidies, externalization of pollution costs, restrictive trade regimes such as TRIPs, etc. However, it is precisely these structures of inequality that go largely unaddressed in the current discourse on global poverty.
- 37 The paradox of “global poverty” is that it has drawn worldwide attention to a phenomenon that is in need of urgent action from a range of global players. Yet, by decontextualizing poverty, it invites “solutions” that are largely ineffective. Raising the alarm about the extent of poverty is not sufficient to combat it effectively. Lack of attention to meaning, historical inequalities, and structural conditions will inevitably slow down the process of poverty alleviation. The wrong strategy may actually reinforce ideas about the intractability of poverty whose ultimate effect is the normalization of human suffering.

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ABSTRACTS

Abstract

Extreme poverty continues to be a major problem in contemporary India despite the fact that the poor are included in democratic politics and national sovereignty. I argue that Agamben's concept of *homo sacer* better allows us to understand the fate of the poor, who can be killed without sacrifice, than Foucault's idea of biopower. However, in recent years, the focus on poverty as a national phenomenon has been replaced with the idea of "global poverty". What is surprising is that the interest in global poverty has arisen at the same time as neoliberal globalization has become hegemonic. The problem with "global poverty" is that it has a contextually thin understanding of poverty. Although the idea of "global poverty" has brought attention to poverty as a worldwide phenomenon, it has led to solutions that are not effective.

Résumé

L'extrême pauvreté continue d'être un problème majeur dans l'Inde d'aujourd'hui, malgré que les pauvres soient intégrés dans la politique démocratique et la souveraineté nationale. Je soutiens plus le concept d'Agamben de *l'homo sacer*, permettant de mieux nous faire comprendre le sort des pauvres — qui peuvent être tués sans sacrifice —, que l'idée de Foucault sur le biopouvoir. Toutefois, ces dernières années, l'accent mis sur la pauvreté comme un phénomène national a été remplacé par la notion de « pauvreté mondiale ». Il est surprenant que l'intérêt pour la pauvreté mondiale a surgi en même temps que la mondialisation néo-libérale est devenue hégémonique. Le problème avec la notion de « pauvreté mondiale », c'est qu'elle permet peu une compréhension du contexte de la pauvreté. Bien que l'idée de « pauvreté mondiale » a attiré l'attention sur la pauvreté comme un phénomène globalisé, elle a conduit à des solutions inefficaces.

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