



## Poverty in South Asia

Reviewed by Moniza Inam

*The erroneous policies of the regional governments in South Asia have given poverty an institutionalised form, as a result of which there is no proverbial light at the end of the tunnel for the countless poor and the disadvantaged.*

POVERTY is pervasive and its effects are deep and profound. Most of us have experienced poverty in our lives in one form or the other, for it is difficult to live in Pakistan and escape its overwhelming presence. The level of deprivation, want and inequality is hard to miss in this deeply divided society. However, it is the vertical division of society which is very cruel and exploitative in nature. The book under review proves to be an eye-opener in this regard.

The erroneous policies of the regional governments in South Asia have given poverty an institutionalised form, as a result of which there is no proverbial light at the end of the tunnel for the countless poor and the disadvantaged.

Poverty is a major concern in South Asia where poverty is not only all-encompassing, but also distributed disproportionately across regions and socio-economic groups, with women, minorities, people belonging to lower castes, casual and migrant labourers, youth and the unemployed as its main victims. It has been estimated that one-third of the population of the South Asian region is chronically poor, which means that they face several forms of deprivation throughout their lives and are most likely to pass it on to their future generations. In statistical terms the figures are astounding as the region's share in world population is 22 per cent but it contains more than 40 per cent of the world's poor.

As it has been rightly pointed out in the Development Report, 'In today's world, the issue of poverty is the major challenge to sustain economic growth, fuel the globalisation process, promote progress towards democracy and reduce social tension and turmoil among various groups within and among nations. Yet many developing countries still wait for the 'trickle down' to work as they focus on accelerated economic growth.'

The report analyses the various dimensions of poverty, coming up with six broad findings. Firstly, a serious commitment towards poverty alleviation is the primary requirement for sustainable economic growth. Secondly, it has been estimated that South Asia would not be able to meet the Millennium Development Goals regarding poverty alleviation even by 2015. Thirdly, the patriarchal system works against the fair sex and makes them more vulnerable. Fourthly, though the existing poverty alleviation programmes have provided some relief to the underprivileged sectors, their effects are limited. Finally, the sine qua non of the poverty question is poor governance, which has

compromised the effectiveness of decentralisation to empower the underprivileged.

Discussing poverty and human development, the report reveals that undue attention has been paid to economic growth and increasing GNP, instead of an equitable distribution of income or resources. 'When the concerns for production and distribution are not dealt with simultaneously, it is not possible for even an impressive GNP growth to filter down automatically.'

Also included in the book are a variety of definitions and concepts of and regarding poverty measurements, such as the international poverty line, the capability poverty measure (CPM), the human poverty index (HPI), the human deprivation measure (HDM) and the poverty of opportunity index (POPI). Perhaps among all these deprivations the most severe is the poverty of opportunities which hinders healthy growth and makes the poor susceptible to other forms of deficiencies and injustices as well.

The report also explores the different dimensions and manifestations of poverty as it is not merely a lack of income but a denial of opportunities for living a decent life. In the region, an estimated 460 to 480 million people are capability/opportunity poor. Human poverty manifests itself in several different forms as premature deaths, poor health, illiteracy, poor living conditions and a lack of personal security. Explaining the gender dimension of poverty, the report states that poverty and gender inequality are interlinked in numerous ways to form a vicious circle that pushes them into a trap of constant denial of rights and extreme discriminations, which is certainly injurious for them and makes them vulnerable to trafficking, early marriages, physical and domestic violence, prostitution, etc. As it has been mentioned in the report, 'Poverty has been feminised in most parts of the world, but in South Asia it truly has a woman's face.'

Discussing the issues of growth, poverty and inequality, the report mentions that income inequality and social exclusion based upon gender, ethnicity and geographical regions is increasing in South Asia. It has mentioned four major reasons for it: first, economic growth is mostly concentrated in urban areas; second, it has followed patterns and favoured those sectors which are traditionally not pro-poor. Third, economic growth is marked by the low employment generation, and lastly, economic policies are usually anti-poor. This issue is particularly relevant to Pakistan as inequality and poverty have made a comeback in a big way where the poor are getting poorer and the rich are getting richer.

The book critically evaluates the economic policies and growth patterns of South Asian countries including India, Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka.

Another very important issue covered is the poverty challenge and governance. There are three distinct forms of governance that influence the level of poverty i.e. economic, political and civic governance. Again the running theme is pro-poor public policies, especially macro-economic policies and a democratic system.

Concluding the debate, the report asserts that the fundamental goal of governments should be alleviating poverty and not just achieving economic growth. They should

concentrate on promoting equality of opportunity because its denial could negate basic human rights.

---

**Human Development in South Asia**

By Mahtub ul Haq

Oxford University Press, Karachi

ISBN 0-19-547501-2

212pp. Rs450

