Perceptions of Poverty in Indian Society

Ameeta Motwani

Jesus and Mary College, University of Delhi, India

Abstract:

Perceptions of different people in India with regard to various aspects of poverty (meaning, nature, causes, remedies, etc.) and their attitudes towards the poor is an underexplored area in academic literature. Based on fieldwork and observations spanning over two decades, this essay presents an analysis of people’s perceptions of poverty in India. The study finds that ‘Location’ (geographical – rural/urban and class – poor/nonpoor) is an important influencer of perceptions. The essay describes the differences between perceptions of rural vs. urban residents and poor vs. non-poor relating to wellbeing and status as well as perceived causes of and solutions to poverty and ‘Poverty Alleviation Programs’ using narratives as illustrations. The insights from interactions with the development community are presented alongside that of others who are not directly engaged in welfare programs. Nature of work/occupation; Exposure to the daily lives of poor people; Family values and beliefs; Academic subjects studied and Level of education; Gender etc. are identified as the factors influencing the perceptions of people.

Keywords: Perceptions of Poverty, India, Wellbeing, Poverty Alleviation, Development Community.

Introduction

Poverty as a subject has continued to interest both - the academic community and the planners and policymakers in India. Though this interest has resulted in the production of vast literature on the subject (Motwani, 2021), there has been no attempt to look at the perceptions of the various actors involved in the construction of the idea of poverty.

Globally, the ‘Perceptions of the Poor’ received some attention in development literature since 2000 when the World Bank dedicated its decadal report on poverty to ‘Voices of the Poor’ (World Bank, 2000). However, perceptions or beliefs, attitudes, etc. of the policymakers and non-poor towards conceptualizations of poverty, its causes, and views on how to remedy it, have still not received the attention it deserves. In India, perceptions of poverty has remained a neglected area of academic research except for an early paper by Jodha (1988) bringing out the difference between poor people’s own criteria of well-being and those of researchers.

The present essay is an attempt to fill this gap in the literature on the subject. The central questions with which this essay deals are: How is poverty perceived by different social actors in a country, which has experienced it on a mass scale for several decades? What is this poverty attributed to by different sections of society? What do people think are the solutions to this problem? Do the non-poor feel a sense of personal responsibility towards the poor? Who do they think should take care of the poor and the destitute in society – the state, civil society, community (families, caste groups, neighborhoods), religious institutions, or a combination of these? Also, how do people look at the plethora of poverty alleviation/social
welfare programs run by the government in this country? And above all, how do people identify someone as poor or otherwise? Throughout this essay, the phrase ‘perceptions of poverty’ stands for these questions. Together, these perceptions (of non-poor, policymakers) influence not only the design of welfare policies but also the public support for them.

It is important to study ‘Perceptions’ of Poverty because historically, the perceptions of the non-poor toward poverty and the poor have influenced the measures dealing with poverty. “Understanding how people living in poverty are viewed is necessary to shift societal attitudes” (Mitchell et al., 2018). Himmelfarb (1984) shows that the social construction of poverty in England varied in different periods of history and that policy followed a given construction of poverty in any historical period such as harsh regimes of Poor Laws and the workhouse until the late nineteenth century which were shaped by the perceptions of that time that pauperism merited condemnation, blame and sometimes punishment. In America too, while the scandal of poverty amidst plenty exposed by Harrington (1962) led to a war on poverty in the 60s, the debate about deserving vs. undeserving poor resulted in a war on welfare in the 80s (Katz, 1989). Reis (1999) argues that it is very important to study the perceptions of those who influence public policy since social policies depend upon the formation of a ‘social consciousness’ which she says is not equal to goodwill or charity but rather encompasses perceptions that are favorable to the acceptance of policies and actions to reduce poverty.

Kaur (2001) believes that the sociological study of poverty should include not only the perceptions of the poor themselves but also the perceptions and definitions that the non-poor have of the poor including the relationship between the poor and the non-poor. Reutter et al. (2002) cite substantial academic literature to argue convincingly that “public perspectives influence governments in the development of public policies … particularly in the area of social welfare”.

### Materials and Methods

This paper is a result of a quest to find answers to the questions mentioned in the previous section. It started with ethnographic fieldwork in a village in the Sonipat district of Haryana state for my doctoral thesis in 2001. The study village is part of Rai block and had a population of around 3000 persons in 500 plus households. Although located in a state perceived to be prosperous, this is a small and relatively poor, low-caste village. More than three-fourths of the households belong to either the backward castes or the scheduled castes. Most of the households comprise small and marginal farmers, landless laborers, and those self-employed in the informal sector.

Despite being poor, the villagers were not unaware of the various welfare programs undertaken by the state and central governments. This is partly due to the proximity of the village to the national capital, which has raised the awareness, as well as aspirations of the people. The villagers take an active interest in discussing benefits received by individuals under different programs and also question the choice of beneficiaries. Given the objective of the study, this village was deemed an appropriate setting.

A conscious decision was made to avoid the use of questionnaires for the collection of information in view of their shortcomings and the substantial mismatch “between the concepts of urban professionals and those of poor rural people …Their penetration is usually shallow, concentrating on what is measurable, answerable, and acceptable as a question, rather than probing less tangible and more qualitative aspects of society.” (Chambers, 1983)

It was, therefore, decided to use the sociological method of ‘Participant Observation’ supplementing it with semi-structured interviews where necessary. The ‘Participant Observation’ included more ‘observation’ – of the interactions among villagers belonging to different castes and economic strata and also between them and the village-level functionaries of the government - the nurse-midwife, the gram sevak/sevika (village extension worker), the school teachers, etc. and some amount of
participation (including working on the farm, having meals with the villagers and attending family celebrations).

Conversations and interviews with the officials at the District Rural Development Agency (DRDA) Sonipat, and Block Development Office (BDO) Rai, provided an opportunity to understand the perceptions of state actors involved in implementing various schemes aimed at the rural poor. Semi-structured interviews with government officials in the Ministry of Human Resource Development; Ministry of Finance; Ministry of Women and Child Development; Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation; and Planning Commission were conducted to understand the perceptions of bureaucrats involved in policy decisions. Here too, the findings are based not only on the long answers to the open-ended interviews but the informal conversations that accompanied the interviews to ascertain the beliefs and attitudes of the respondents including the tone, facial expressions, and how they talked about the poor. On many occasions, during visits for these interviews, I could witness the state or block-level officials interacting with the villagers. All these observations were noted down and form the basis of the assertions made in this paper about perceptions of the development community. Some of these are used as narrative examples in this paper.

Since the initial fieldwork which forms the substantial basis for most of the findings in this paper, is more than two decades old, the findings of the initial fieldwork were tested and validated by more recent visits to the villages in different parts of the country. These include - interactions with the local politicians, bureaucrats, and residents of cities and villages in the different regions of the erstwhile Andhra Pradesh in 2010 and field visits to villages in Telangana (2014), Rajasthan (2015) and Punjab (2017) for a study on ‘Agrarian Distress and Women’. Most of these interactions confirmed the earlier findings, particularly the fact that ‘poverty’ in people’s perception is a ‘Relative’ concept though it has an ‘Absolute’ core.

Besides these instances of active fieldwork/visits, interviews and conversations with people from different walks of life (students, housewives, businessmen, college teachers, executives in the private corporate sector, domestic help, etc.) over the last two decades have provided an insight into their perceptions of poverty. Lastly, participation in seminars, workshops, training programs, and interactions with Delhi-based NGOs, etc. throughout this period (2001 – 2022) provided information that helped clarify, confirm and refine the initial findings about perceptions of poverty in India.

Results and Discussion

Urban (middle class) Perceptions of Poverty

When quizzed directly about the meaning of poverty, almost all urban respondents (the sample consists of residents in Delhi) initially identified ‘the poor’ with the beggars they encountered on the roads and at traffic signals. It was only later, as the conversation progressed, that many of them could see those others (who might be working for them) such as their gardeners, home painters, construction workers, domestic servants, rickshaw pullers, persons ironing their clothes, street vendors, etc. could also be ‘the poor’ that we were talking about. Most urban respondents felt that poverty was worse in rural areas. Most of the slum dwellers were identified as poor by the middle-class urbanites who associated poverty with dirt, filth, and degraded living conditions. Most of them described the very poor (children in particular) as underfed, malnourished, wearing tattered clothes, and having matted hair.

Appearances and dress are important components of people in Delhi forming the first impression about a person’s class or economic status. Just as the rural society in India is organized around a caste-based hierarchy, the city people seem to have their own status hierarchy which is largely based on the appearance of a person. At the bottom-most of this hierarchy are people in soiled, torn clothes with no or torn footwear and on the top are
those attired in fancy expensive (often branded) clothes and footwear.

Those whose clothes may not be torn but are not sparkling clean or ironed (an important requirement of respectability in popular perceptions as brought out by the television advertisements of almost all brands of washing detergents) are above the level of extremely poor but still poor. In between these extremes, we have numerous other levels depending upon the price of the material used (silk and fine cotton is preferred over synthetic and coarse materials) and the tailoring as well as style and brand. In the higher echelons, people (specially females) are judged not only by their clothes, jewellery and accessories but also by the smoothness of their skin and hair. Dry hair and skin are accorded low status.

When asked to define poverty, one simple definition that came from a businessman was ‘it is a condition nobody wants to be in’. A lecturer in the History Department of a college in Delhi University was more articulate as she talked at length about the living conditions associated with poverty. According to her the economic aspect of poverty which is lack of money is only a part of the experience of being poor and the social meaning of poverty is a ‘negative image of human life’ meaning poverty is the opposite of the ‘celebration of human life’. According to her poverty was associated with powerlessness, helplessness, and ignorance.

Persons involved in small-scale business activities (traders, shopkeepers, factory owners, etc.) were found to be aware of the hardships of poverty due to their daily interactions with these (relatively) poor people as their employees. They said they got to know about their problems when these poor employees asked for leave or loans due to illness, death, or other tragic events in their families. As a result of being aware of these hardships and due to the loss of respectability/prestige associated with poverty, they expressed a fear of poverty. Unlike qualified professionals or government servants, small businessmen have no security of income. Many of them know that if their businesses suffer losses due to any unforeseen reason, they may fall into (at least relative) poverty. This is their worst nightmare. One of the driving forces in life for this group is to earn enough money so that neither they themselves nor their family members/children after their death should ever experience poverty.

At the same time, this class has little faith in the state machinery to be able to address poverty. This lack of trust in the ‘government system’ is due to their interactions with the corrupt officials in the income tax, sales tax, excise, customs, and other such departments that deal with small businesses. They, therefore, do not feel guilty about not paying their taxes and the so-called ‘black money’ is not taboo for them. One gentleman belonging to this class suggested that if there is a ‘poverty tax’ and he is somehow assured that this money would actually be spent on the welfare of the poor, he would not mind paying that additional tax. This person is personally contributing to and helping in fundraising for an NGO working for providing education to children living in the slums/footpaths.

Persons with business management backgrounds and others who belonged to the top ranks in the private corporate sector were observed to be rarely engaged in any serious talk on poverty in the country. Conversations with them were dominated by topics such as share prices, corporate strategies, interest rates, and the latest consumer goods. They see little poverty in the world inhabited by them though they see a lot of people poorer than themselves around them e.g., the domestic helper, carpenter, home-painter, car mechanic, driver, gardener, ironing man... the list is endless. This is because their mental space seems to be occupied by the thoughts of who amongst their friends, relatives, colleagues or neighbors are better off than themselves. The ‘reference group’ assumed importance when people thought about where they stood on the social ladder. In a society that is rapidly turning consumerist, social status was found to be associated more with economic indicators (cars, houses, furniture, electronic gadgets) than with ‘old-fashioned’ status criteria such as caste, family background, scholarship, or character.
Some of the city elite could not believe it when told that they constituted the top 1% of the Indian households in terms of income and/or wealth. They seemed to have little idea about the extent of poverty in India and were vaguely conscious of the statistics of poverty through newspaper stories. Many of them knew that 30-40% of Indians live below the so-called poverty line but very few had any idea of the level of income at which the poverty line at current prices was drawn.

There was little sympathy for the slum dwellers among the residents of neighboring ‘posh’ colonies who saw them as illegal encroachers on public property. It is part of the middle-class folklore that these slums exist because of the patronage of the political parties who look upon them as their vote banks. People complained that these slums made their colonies look ugly and also felt unsafe due to their presence in their neighborhood as these clusters were seen as places where crime breeds. There was little appreciation on their part of the services rendered by the residents in these slums e.g., most of their part-time domestic helpers live there.

**Rural Perceptions of Poverty**

In the village under study (hereinafter called Kashipur which is the pseudonym assigned to it), people regarded ownership of a house (and not so much its condition) as a criterion for identifying the poor. It meant that someone living on rent was identified as poor. Unlike big cities where well-to-do upper-middle-class people also find it difficult to buy a house, almost everyone in Kashipur has a house. This is because every adult male who does not own any land is allotted a plot for a dwelling unit from the Gram Sabha (village common) land and the cost of construction is very low. Many villagers construct their houses using family labor and whatever construction material they can afford.

A household that could not afford to spend on customary expenses on occasions such as marriage, birth, and death in the family, was also referred to as very poor. A woman who had three or more daughters and particularly if she was a widow or had been deserted by her husband, was referred to as bechari garib (poor woman) bringing out that poverty is associated with vulnerability in popular perception. Similarly, a landless person who did not have a secure job was considered poor by himself and others since his only source of income is wage labor and he, therefore, is vulnerable to falling into poverty in the event of being incapacitated due to illness, accident or death.

Ownership of farmland is used by the villagers as an important determinant of where a person is placed on the rich-poor scale. Everyone, however, agreed that the poorest was someone who did not have enough to eat.

**The invisible poor**

While identifying the poor in the village, the villagers failed to mention the migrant laborers called ‘Naukers’ (most of whom came from the neighboring state of Bihar). Their names do not appear on the BPL list of the government either. As a result, they are not recognized as residents of the village and were not entitled to subsidized grains under the Public Distribution System (PDS). They stayed either on the farm (a small room constructed for the tube well) or in the house of their employer. These laborers were found to be the worst off in terms of not only income and assets but also in terms of opportunities for education and health care for their children and families since they come to the village for a few months in the year during harvest and return during the lean season.

**Rural vs. Urban Perceptions of Wellbeing**

An attempt was made to identify (through informal conversations and observations during social interaction) what signified ‘well-being’ for different people, the lack of which would be considered by them as ‘deprivation’ or poverty? An analysis of the differences in rural and urban perceptions of well-being and signifiers of status is presented in this section.

Children in villages even from economically well-to-do families (in terms of income) go around without footwear and wearing dirty and tattered clothes. As mentioned above, urbanites identify these conditions with poverty, and therefore were any of them to come and see
these children, they would no doubt categorize most of them as belonging to poor families. While urban middle-class parents spend a good amount of money on their children’s clothing and education and even the poor in the cities spend as much on these items as they can afford to, it doesn’t seem to be the case in villages in Haryana. Children from upper-caste families in the village were relatively better dressed than those belonging to lower-caste families of similar means. In the few families where one or both the parents were in salaried (especially government) employment, parental values concerning childcare and grooming were found to be closer to those of the urban middle-class parents.

For the women in Haryana villages, it is very important to wear glass bangles on their arms. It is their favorite pastime too. The women’s sense of well-being seems to be dependent upon having at least enough money to be able to buy glass bangles for herself and possibly her daughters. Observing their happiness while selecting and buying bangles, it appeared that they would prefer to go without a meal than to appear in public without bangles on their arms. This reinforces the argument of sociologists that what constitutes well-being for a person, depends to a large extent on social and cultural norms and values. Similarly, the amount spent on ceremonies such as marriage and death in the family and the number of guests entertained on such occasions were important determinants of status and well-being in the village.

Ownership of agricultural land, motor vehicles, tractor, and other machines too are important symbols of status in the villages in most parts of the country. For the upper and upper-middle-class urbanite, the school that his children attend, the kind of house and the locality where he lives, and the ownership and type of motor vehicle he drives are seen as more important status symbols than the amount spent on ceremonies connected to death in the family.

Having a good job appeared to be a common factor in the list of priorities of both the urban as well as the rural residents but the meaning of what constitutes a good job seemed different for the two. The villagers in Kashipur considered the government jobs to be the best as these seem to offer security as well as benefits such as retirement, medical and family support in case of death. Also, the general perception was that one need not work (at least not very hard) in these jobs and therefore one may (if one wishes so) can take care of one’s farm or pursue any other part-time occupation. As a result, villagers in Haryana were ready to pay huge sums as bribes for getting these jobs. Also, it is worth mentioning here that none of the scheduled caste households owned any farmland but many of them could manage a good lifestyle (by village standards) as they were able to get lower-rung jobs in the government (as beneficiaries of reservation policy in government jobs). In the city, lower-rung government jobs were in great demand among members of the lower and lower-middle-class due to the reasons cited above. However, members of the upper-middle class and those who were professionally qualified preferred to work for a multi-national or Indian Company (and even a start-up) rather than for the government. They cited the expectation of higher pay packets as well as a more professional work environment as the reasons for their choice. More recently, the younger generation is keen to start their own business as the start-up culture has become popular with increasing venture capital funds entering the market.

Perceptions of Causes of Poverty

Writing over thirty years ago, the Australian psychologist Feather (1974)—drawing on an earlier U.S. study by Feagin (1972)—distinguished between causes of poverty that were individualistic (a reflection of the behavior of the poor themselves), structural (the result of external forces such as lack of education or low wages), or fatalistic (the result of factors such as illness or bad luck). In a similar vein, Haveman (2000), citing the work of Lampman (1965), has described economists’ views on the causes of poverty in the 1960s as consisting of a constellation of three factors. The first is events that are external to the individual, the second relates to social barriers in the form of caste, class, or custom, and the third the limited ability of the poor to earn their way out of poverty. (Saunders, 2003 pp. 6-7)
At the time when India had a very high poverty rate (close to 50% in the 1960s which came down to around 33% by the early 2000s but remained high), the general perception was that poverty was caused by structural factors such as high unemployment rates resulting from an under-developed and slowly growing economy. The question of ‘deserving vs. non-deserving poor’ and the debates around the ‘culture of poverty’ in the USA sparked by Oscar Lewis’s article on the subject (Lewis, 1998) were absent in academic discourses as well as people’s perceptions in general. After the liberalization policies of the 1990s and the resultant high GDP growth rates in the early 2000s (even though not matched by growth in jobs and therefore termed as ‘jobless growth’), the general perception (particularly that of the urban middle class, who happens to be the main beneficiary of the economic reform policies) seems to have changed towards individualistic explanations of the causes of poverty.

Many urban non-poor residents who have little contact with the poor as part of their job think that the poor themselves are (at least partially) responsible for their poverty. According to them, the poor produce many children and do not understand the importance of education and therefore do not invest enough in their children’s education (in terms of time, effort and money). Some said that the poor lacked the will to improve their lives and were ignorant/lazy etc.

The urban poor, on the other hand, identified non-availability of work at fair returns as the major cause of their poverty. The conspicuous consumption of the rich (big cars, lavish parties, etc.) which they witness around them has led to the perception that both, the government as well as the rich and powerful are responsible for their condition.

In the face-to-face society of the village, non-poor households were more aware of the circumstances of the poor. Also, they could see clearly that the majority of the poor were poor because they had little access to land which was related to their caste besides other things. The poor, as well as non-poor in the village, see a shortage of well-paying jobs as an important reason for poverty. The rural poor sometimes mentioned fate as one of the many causes.

Corruption as one of the perceived causes of poverty cut across the rural-urban and rich-poor divide. Everyone seemed to agree that it was an important reason behind the poverty of people. The remark by former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi that only 20 paisa in a rupee spent for the poor reaches them appeared to have touched a nerve and was mentioned by people ranging from a slum dweller in Delhi to a public servant in Sonepat in 2001. However, since then perceptions seem to have changed with corruption becoming a major issue in the electoral politics leading to coming in power of parties perceived to be less corrupt. Over time, people’s perceptions seem to be informed more by the individualistic causes of poverty than the structural ones.

Perceived Solutions of Poverty

The urban educated middle class seems to think of education as the key to solving the problem of poverty. There appears to be a ‘consensus’ among them over the role of education in ameliorating poverty. This consensus has emerged due to the percolation of academic discourse and government advocacy on the subject to the common person. Most of them, however, have little idea as to how education will help given the lack of opportunities available to the rural (and also to urban) poor or the poor condition of rural infrastructure.

The poor (rural as well as urban) saw the availability of work at a reasonable wage rate to be the most important solution to their problem. From the point of view of an individual, the solution to his/her poverty lies in getting a secure job, which carries perks like medical benefits, old-age pension, and pension for the family in case of disability or death of the earning member. That is why the government jobs are at a very high premium. Education is seen as a necessary (though not sufficient) condition for getting such a job. Other things (besides education) perceived to be needed to secure such a job are social networks and political clout as well as money to be given as bribes.
Perceptions of Poverty Alleviation Programmes

Despite the big full-page advertisements in newspapers by the various state governments and government ministries/departments boasting of their achievements, people in general and the non-poor urbanite, in particular, had very little idea about the various poverty alleviation schemes. Villagers in Kashipur were more aware of these schemes and demanded these benefits as a matter of right irrespective of their economic status (e.g. old-age pensions and schemes for widows). The villagers in remote and backward areas, it was learnt (from bureaucrats who had worked there), were neither so informed nor so assertive. The level of awareness however seems to have increased everywhere during the last two decades.

Urban educated persons (when informed about the numerous schemes in operation) failed to understand why poverty persists if the government is doing all this. Corruption and leakages were the only explanation they could think of since the complexity of the problem of poverty was something beyond their comprehension. In such a scenario the uneducated and less educated simply blamed the government officials and middlemen for pocketing whatever is meant for the poor. People, in general, did not differentiate between honest and efficient or corrupt and inefficient public servants and painted all of them with the same broad brush. However, the villagers who had interacted with the public servants did mention that such and such official (welfare service provider) was sympathetic and helpful and that someone else was rude and indifferent.

Perceptions of the Development Community

Most government functionaries seemed to be influenced by the ‘official’ notions of poverty. However, some of them were able to see beyond the rhetoric due to personal experiences, level and type of education, and family background. The position of the person in the official hierarchy also appeared to be an important factor in a person’s outlook toward poor people. While the top officials seemed to be relatively more influenced by the ‘discourses of poverty’, the perceptions of the lower-level bureaucracy seem to be circumscribed by the ‘implementation’ aspect.

Bureaucrats belonging to the Indian Administrative Services (IAS) and those working in the central ministries at higher levels were found to be in tune with the current academic/official discourse on the subject of development and poverty. Their language involved a lot of jargon that they had picked up from these discourses. For example, terms like ‘multi-dimensional poverty’, ‘empowerment’, ‘participatory approaches’, ‘role of gender’, ‘human development’ ‘good governance’ etc. occurred frequently in discussions with them.

This seems to be due to the following reasons (1) These officials are often sent for training abroad (or for training programs conducted by the international donor agencies who create and disseminate the changing discourses) (2) They read a fair amount of academic and journalistic writings on the subject of development and poverty (3) Senior development bureaucrats interact with the officials in the international donor agencies in connection with the conception and implementation of development projects funded by these agencies.

However, as one went down the bureaucratic hierarchy, the understanding of poverty regressed from the definitions currently used in the official discourses to the ones used in the 1990s, 1980s, and 1970s. At lower levels of bureaucracy, the notions of poverty seemed to be narrower, being circumscribed by the ‘implementation’ aspect probably because the academic notions of ‘poverty’ seemed too abstract to them. The understanding of poverty among the development bureaucracy at the District and Block level seemed embedded in their knowledge of familiar categories such as the Poverty Alleviation Programs (PAPs) and the BPL lists.

It was observed that the officials involved with the implementation of a certain PAP were more concerned with fulfilling the targets for that
program than with ensuring that the ‘poor’ who has approached them is helped with the best available option which could be under a competing scheme.

**Decreasing Levels of Sympathy**

While the officials at the top seemed quite sympathetic to the poor, the level of sympathy seemed to decrease as one went down the hierarchy (other factors remaining the same). A few development workers at the village level felt that ‘the poor’ (by which they meant the official poor as per the BPL list) are ‘greedy, dishonest people, out to loot the government’ (personal communications with the block level officials and the gram-sevika in Kashipur). One of the reasons for this probably was that very often, the beneficiaries of substantial subsidies under the government schemes were well-to-do people who had entered the BPL list through their clout and connection. This happened because the official BPL list in the study village included the names of quite a few non-poor (as per local standards) and many poor were left out of this list. Also, when the decision about ‘who should get the loan or any other benefit under a particular scheme’ had to be made, those persons from the BPL list were selected who were part of the social networks of either the local politicians or the development workers and often, they happened to be from the better-off sections of the village community.

The question arises as to whether the lower-level bureaucracy had a negative opinion about the beneficiaries who claimed benefits of PAPs even though they were not poor or are these notions based on a deeper class and caste perception about the poor themselves and are then conflated with the corruption of the non-poor who act as poor? Mitchell et al. (2018) finds that in Canada, "individuals who are living in poverty not only face stigmatization from the people they encounter daily but from the very individuals who are supposed to be helping and supporting them”. It is therefore plausible that the views expressed by the gram-sevika in Kashipur were meant not only for the corrupt beneficiaries but also for the poor in general. It is an important area for further investigation since the quality of the services received by the poor depends largely upon the perceptions and attitudes of the village-level development workers.

The village-level workers were seen by this author as using their power and resorting to the exploitation of the poor.

**Conclusion**

Perceptions of different people in India with regard to various aspects of poverty (meaning, nature, causes, remedies, etc.) and their attitudes towards the poor is an underexplored area in academic literature. This paper is, therefore, raising more questions than providing definite answers. It seemed to me during the two decades of the quest to understand people’s perceptions that some of the factors influencing these perceptions are: Nature of work/occupation; Exposure to the daily lives of poor people; family values and beliefs; academic subjects studied and level of education; gender etc. However, we need much more empirical work with larger data sets to be able to establish co-relation and determine causation. For example, I found that people who have studied literature defined poverty more empathetically in terms of the living conditions of the poor while those who have a background in economics or business studies/commerce, talked about the poor in terms of people who live below the national or international poverty line. This may be because of the training in different subjects. However, a valid methodological question can be - Is it the study of different disciplines that makes a difference, or is it that different kinds of temperaments are attracted to different disciplines? The answer to it requires much more intensive work on academic disciplines and poverty perceptions such as Hill et al. (2016) who studied the influence of coursework on the poverty perceptions of students in a master’s in social work (MSW) program in the USA.

However, what I found and summarized here are the differences and commonalities between the perceptions of the poor and the non-poor as well as between the perceptions of the urban
(middle-class) and the villagers (in certain parts of India) concerning the meaning of poverty and wellbeing; causes of and solutions to poverty. It is hoped that more research in this area will fill the remaining gaps in our understanding of the factors that influence these perceptions.

Conflict of Interests
No conflict of interest.

References


Appendix 1

1 India had the dubious distinction of being home to the largest number of people in extreme poverty in the world until recently (World Bank 2018: 30).

2 The BPL list refers to the list of households identified according to the government’s criterion of poverty as living Below (the official) Poverty Line (BPL) for the purpose of various welfare schemes meant for the poor, one of them being the provision of grains at subsidized rates. In village Kashipur, these households were referred to as Peeley Caard Waaley(Yellow Card Holders) because their ration card (under the PDS scheme) was of yellow color while others had a different color card.

3 In fact, Adam Smith, the father of economics, was aware of the importance of this dimension and noted that customary standards also determine what is a necessity. He wrote, “Custom, in the same manner, has rendered leather shoes a necessary of life in England. The poorest creditable person of either sex would be ashamed to appear in public without them” (quoted in Sen 1981). Townsend too has emphasized the importance of the “endeavour to define the style of living which is generally shared or approved in each society and find whether there is...a point in the scale of the distribution of resources below which families find it increasingly difficult …to share in the customs, activities, and diets comprising that style of living.” for understanding poverty. (quoted in Sen, 1981).

4 See Motwani (2021) for the changing discourses of poverty in India.