

Promotion of Equality of Opportunity = Reduction of Inequalities

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Abstract: *Ending inequalities is a laudable objective. However it is more easily tackled if at first equal opportunities in food, shelter, education and health care are made available. Disparities in income and wealth are often due to crony capitalism or rentiering, Schumpeterian entrepreneurship and innovation, scientific and technological breakthrough, or just luck. Instead of making an assault on such disparities per se, it would be prudent to make available equal opportunities to economically weaker sections so that the odds are better for the deprived to come up in life. Research also shows that there are numerous unchallenging steps to advance equal opportunities within a relatively short period and without budget-breaking.*

Key Indexing Terms: *Deprivations; Universal education and health; Marxian power associations, Inequalities.*

I. Introduction

Inequality versus Deprivation

Pragmatists would not agonize about skewed incomes and wealth. Instead they would focus mainly on distribution of basics not as an entitlement or gratuity, but as a humane society's concern to promote all people's capabilities and functionalities. The flip side to this would be: How much longer should the poor anywhere continue to be deprived of life's basics? What really matters is not if the top two quintiles make 50 or 60 percent of the incomes or possess 50 or 60 percent of the wealth, or if the bottom two quintiles receive less than 20 percent or 30 percent. Similarly, it is not worrisome if the Lorenz curve is way too much drooping close to the cumulative population line or close to the perfectly equal 45⁰ diagonal distribution line. What is of concern is one of providing opportunities for human development, and not the location of the Lorenz curve as under the Pigou-Dalton principle.¹ Discussions about inequality sound somewhat hollow in the face of glaring inequality of opportunities and conspicuous deprivations.

Income inequality is corrected in many countries by means of redistributive income taxation at varying costs in terms of slower growth or nil effect on inequality, or both. The marginal income tax rates in India not long ago were almost 100+ percent above a given low income ceiling, giving a valid excuse to the rich to evade them and indulge in black or tax-avoided income. Tax law enforcement was not anywhere competent like in the USA. Both such taxation as well as welfare benefits that are not means-tested could discourage people from working. Why would a rational person make more if only to part with most of it by way of taxes? In America, there are hedge fund owners and managers who have winner-take-all incomes that run into millions every year, net worth doubling swiftly to over a billion, increasing inequalities prominently². The same is the situation with inventors, soft-ware and app developers, celebrity singers, and sports persons, gamblers and lottery-winners. As Angus Deaton would say "Inequality is partly a marker of success. If someone thinks up some new innovation that benefits many, and the market works right, they get richly rewarded for that and that's just terrific and that creates inequality."

Some of the harshest inequalities have originated from successful innovations such as the steam engine, or computer software and applications such as Apple I-phone, Google, Facebook, What'sApp and so forth³. Facebook, Apple, Netflix and Google (FANG) stock prices provided the source of alpha or the excess of return compared to a benchmark, thereby contributing disproportionately to overall S&P 500 returns or to NASDAQ 100. Schumpeterian innovation is embraced everywhere, but not crony capitalism, people in the top one or ten percent living off inherited economic fat. Crony capitalists tend to invest heavily in politics to retain or gain political clout.

Contrast this with the recent Deaton-Case findings of the epidemic of self-destructive behavior of middle-aged white Americans significantly increasing mortality rates due to higher incidence of suicides, narcotic excesses or binge drinking damaging the livers.⁴ Higher incomes and education were supposed to increase happiness and well-being and not bring about pikes in mortality rates. There are thus shades of grey for every change in variables, and there cannot be a rush to judgment if what occurred is good and helpful, or bad and harmful as it relates to reducing poverty/inequality. Similarly a wealth tax cannot be guaranteed to reduce inequality because of the dynamics of macroeconomic factors as for example, the savings-investment rates, depreciation rate, growth rate, the dimensions of wealth and income increases, and of course plain capital flight

and tax evasion. They impinge on each other, and on inequality. Picketty's famed $r - g$ alone will not help us get down to the brass-tacks of inequality reduction.

Improving HDI with Ease

At times inequality is reduced in unpredictable ways, like stopping gender discrimination in compensation. By way of further evidence, as simple a deed as rehydration has saved millions of lives and improved longevity. This is the case of oral rehydration solution (ORS) consisting of salt, sugar and water.⁵ ORS has saved millions of children vulnerable to diarrheal diseases thereby improving life expectancy and impacting the Human Development Index (HDI) positively. On account of regular surveys and collection of data, together with honing simple solutions over the decades, child mortality in Bangladesh has been reduced 75 percent in 25 years. ORS has had global applications. Better health and well-being are significant contributors to better life. Another significant example listed earlier is the McKinsey Global Institute's finding that tapping women's potential and ensuring greater women's labor participation rate would add \$28 trillion to global GDP as early as by 2025 (See Table 3) Bhutan's Gross Happiness Index (GHI) is now trending among wellness watchers.⁶

Reduction of inequality in unpredictable ways is further illustrated by the work of Raj Chetty. Social mobility is a significant factor in reduction of inequality. Using Big Data from NSS Survey Chetty finds that in the US there has not been any significant change in the chances of moving up in income terms over the past 40 years.

Table 1: India's HDI trends based on consistent time series data and new goalposts

	Life Expectancy at birth years	Schooling Years	Mean years of Schooling	GNI per capita (2011 PPP\$)	HDI value
1980	53.9	6.4	1.9	1,255	0.362
1985	55.8	7.3	2.4	1,446	0.397
1990	57.9	7.7	3.0	1,754	0.428
1995	60.4	8.3	3.5	2,046	0.462
2000	62.6	8.5	4.4	2,522	0.496
2005	64.5	9.9	4.8	3,239	0.539
2010	66.5	11.1	5.4	4,499	0.586
2011	66.9	11.7	5.4	4,745	0.597
2012	67.3	11.7	5.4	4,909	0.600
2013	67.6	11.7	5.4	5,180	0.604
2014	68.0	11.7	5.4	5,497	0.609

Table 2: India's HDI indicators for 2014 relative to selected countries and groups

	HDI value	HDI rank	Life expectan cy at birth	Expected years of schooling	Mean years of schooling of schooling	GNI per Capita (PPP US\$)
India	0.609	130	68.0	11.7	5.4	5,497
Bangladesh	0.570	142	71.6	10.0	5.1	3,191
Pakistan	0.538	147	66.2	7.8	4.7	4,866
South Asia	0.607	—	68.4	11.2	5.5	5,605
Medium HDI	0.630	—	68.6	11.8	6.2	6,353

Source for Tables 1 and 2: UNDP: UN Development Report 2015 accessible at http://hdr.undp.org/sites/all/themes/hdr_theme/country-

This is notwithstanding the cries of discrimination and other handicaps as well as the increase in US inequality. What are the odds of someone moving up from the bottom fifth to the top fifth income quintile? In the US it is 7.5 percent compared to 13.5 percent in Canada and 11.7 percent in Denmark.⁷ In USA itself there are great variations from 4.5 in Atlanta to 16.8 percent in the Great Plains areas such as Iowa. The chances of improving one's living standards are much better in Canada or Denmark than in the US, or wherever the neighborhoods are progressing with skilled and educated people. It is also as simple as being born into a well-off family. In certain

locations such as Charlotte or Atlanta the percentage probability of someone in the lowest quintile easing up into the top quintile is five percent. Researchers are not sure of the causal factors for improving mobility across income quintiles. Inequality is definitely one of them. Family togetherness or integrity as opposed to single parenting was another. Early pregnancy has had a negative influence even as good teachers and schools had a positive influence. Similar analyses of Indian empirical data would yield a harvest of many new piquant facts relevant to inequality reduction. Chetty's more recent study shows the close association between incomes and life expectancy with geographical location adding noticeably to variations.⁸ Such an analysis for India with more diversity but less data in every one of the states would be more challenging. For instance chances of improving standards of living are perhaps better in Maharashtra or Tamilnadu than in Bihar.

II. Targeting Inequality

When poverty reduction becomes a principal goal, noteworthy progress becomes possible such as under the Millennium Development Goals. World-wide, the number of people living on \$1.25 (revised up to \$1.90 as per 2015 purchasing power parity) or less fell from 1.9 billion in 1990 to 836 million in 2015, exceeding the goal of halving the number that are poor. This has meant the reduction of the number poor in developing countries from about 50 percent to 14 percent. This is considered the fastest rate of poverty reduction, much of the credit being given to China's fast growth contributing to uplifting millions of poor. Also there is a note of caution: keeping the \$1.90 per day as the benchmark, compared to the average life of a middle class person, the progress has been "from unimaginably poor to unimaginably poor."⁹

The new estimates show that the number living below the \$1.90 global poverty line would be reduced to less than 10 percent of world population in 2015. In absolute numbers, the number living below the upgraded \$1.90 would come down from 902 million or 12.5 percent of world population in 2012 to 702 million or 9.6 percent of the world population in 2015. Assuming India would continue to account for 40% of the world's poor population, their number in India would be 300 million in 2015. Strong growths in developing countries together with investments in education, health programs and in safety-net measures have contributed to these outcomes. The goal is to end extreme poverty entrenched in sub-Saharan African countries and in South Asia by 2030.¹⁰ The main problems according to the World Bank paper are incomplete data about depth of poverty, the unevenness of shared economic progress and vast divergences in non-income dimensions of progress. In simple plain words the connotation is that deprivations of all kinds would continue far into the future, poverty or no poverty, including lack of drinking water, toilets, quality education and health care.

India's Poverty Estimates as per URP and MMRP Methods

Food intake can throw light on life expectancy, state of wellness, and on the HDI itself. The preliminary studies of Indian poverty, especially of rural poverty, based on calorie intake were by VM Dandekar and Nilkanth Rath.¹¹ P.V Sukhatme's suggestion for adopting the stochastic comparisons of income/expenditures was adopted by P.C. Mahalanobis as head of the Commission on Distribution of Income and Wealth. Under the National Sample Survey (NSS) respondents have a 30-day recall period for consumption of food and non-food items to estimate the expenditures. These are called the Uniform Reference Period (URP) of aggregate consumption expenditures. World Bank estimate of baseline poverty rate as per the URP consumption expenditures for 2011-12 was 21.2 percent. Since 2009-10 the NSS has been using the Modified Mixed Reference Period (MMRP) in which a 7-day recall period is used for food items and one year recall period for non-food items. The MMRP is expected to yield more accurate results of aggregate expenditures. Under the MMRP thanks to much larger expenditures under the surveys both in rural and urban areas, the poverty rate for 2011-12 has been re-estimated at a substantially lower level of 12.4 percent of the population. This is the new baseline of poverty.¹² The trajectory for poverty and inequality is definitely negative, but that begs the question of ending deprivations. The deprivation issue for India is stupendous not because it is complex, hard or tough, but it is ignored in most discussions, or it is believed that ending poverty or inequalities will automatically end deprivations. Evidence proves it is not necessarily so.

III. Differences in Approach between Bhagawati-Panagariya and Dreze-Sen

In this backdrop, the recent Bhagawati-Panagariya and Dreze-Sen differences on this theme appear perplexing because, for the greater good, or at least Pareto optimality, pragmatism calls for both equal opportunities and rapid growth going hand-in-hand though there could be questions about the right sequencing of policy measures. Building up capability and ending deprivations such as lack of drinking water, toilets, rudimentary education, and health care should be the highest priority. They should be available to all people anywhere on tap on a default basis. No one should be expected to wait for many years to come, or at best, get them on a random or on an ad hoc basis. Outlay on them need to be first charge on resources lest the deprivation issue burgeons and becomes less manageable.

Dreze-Sen rightly point out that the privileged sections with education and affluent living are marginalizing the bulk of the Indian population. They rightly regard it an imbalanced situation when there is relatively rapid growth, but slow progress in living standards of people. The human capabilities must be enhanced by devoting resources targeted at that very goal so that there is no conspicuous suffering from hunger and deprivations.¹³ When deprivations are reduced, individual capacity for growth is enhanced. That is wholesome for the entire economy.

The Gini does not capture such deprivations. And the irony is China or Brazil may have a much bigger Gini and a Lorenz far to the right, and yet neither China nor Brazil has deprivations on the same scale as India does, albeit with a much smaller Gini. The statistic misses out on the role of public services in education, healthcare and other social dimensions. While inequalities may be more stunning in China, comparisons are irrelevant in view of the modicum of basic facilities available by default in China whereas a sizeable proportion of Indians is deprived. There is extraordinary tolerance of multidimensional deprivations in India. It is indeed a different kind of inequality that has to be tackled head-on with more than normal level of honest government intervention at the national, state and municipal levels for any decent measure of success. Hirschman and Rothschild used the “Tunnel Effect” metaphor to explain this tolerance: like those stuck in the tunnel feel somewhat better that the traffic congestion in the tunnel is getting cleared and their own turn to get out of the tunnel is coming soon, similarly when other citizens’ standards start improving, the deprived may feel their own chance for an improvement is approaching.¹⁴

“Grow first, distribute later” will not work if people’s tolerance for inequality is low as it is getting to be in India. Deprivations have become so conspicuous around the world that recently even Pope Francis felt compelled to reject the “trickle down” theories with a “naïve trust in the goodness of those wielding power and in the sacralized workings of the economic system.”¹⁵ Also in India it is irrelevant in view of abysmal statistics: It is intolerable that 334 million Indians do not have access to drinking water even now in 2016, some 67 years after gaining freedom, and after a dozen or more Five Year Plans. 53 percent of Indian homes (70 percent in rural areas) do not have toilets, leading to contamination of water and water-borne diseases. India has 287 million illiterates, 37 % of world’s total. This must have ended as early as 1975, and so should end at least now. While from a macroeconomic perspective the outcomes of inclusive growth as proposed in the Union Budget (2015-16) may be the same, larger allocation for health, education and more basically for drinking water, sanitation (toilets for the masses) would have far better outcomes in terms of poverty and inequality reduction without compromising on rapid growth (as under the Gujarat model.)

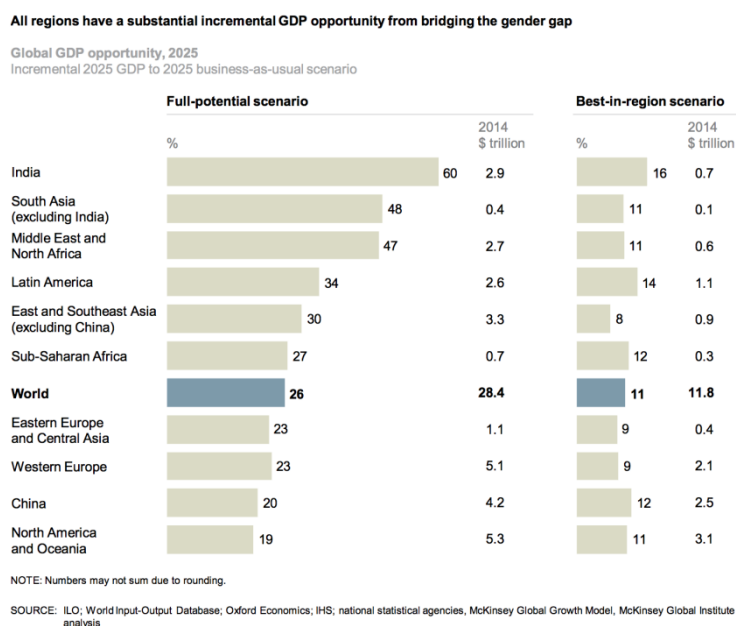
India need not also tolerate at this juncture what Raj Krishna described as Hindu rates of growth. Both Sen and Bhagawati without a doubt believe in inequality reduction as well as rapid growth, albeit the differences in emphasis and sequencing of projects. That China has been able to pull millions more out of poverty receives uncritical acceptance by Dreze and Sen although they do not cringe mentioning China’s failure to prevent famine for want of democracy. They also mention the success of Kerala state in ensuring longer years of life expectancy. Finally there is much truth in the criticism that the fetishism about growth in India at the cost of neglecting deprivations reflects “a disarmingly foggy understanding of how long-run growth and participatory development can actually be achieved and sustained.”¹⁶ This is unsettling and makes one think if democracy works effectively in India. At the same time it would have been fair if equal stress was put on rapid growth because that is not antithetical to ending deprivations. Priorities in investment, such as drinking water, sanitation and education ought to matter higher than anything else.

The CCC List of Projects with Benefits 15 Times the Costs

Bhagawati and Panagariya are no doubt pro-growth-oriented asking minimal government interventions to address any kind of inequality.¹⁷ They put faith in the metaphor that a good (economic) tide raises all boats including hopes of the deprived. There is much merit in what they say and cannot be ignored. Their main oversight relates to not attaching urgency to ending the glaring deprivations. Also there is a scientific case for doing so. For instance, the benefit cost ratios of projects listed by the Copenhagen Consensus Center score over other arguments, with benefits 15 times or more than costs: The CCC list includes: 1) Lower chronic child malnutrition by 40%. 2) Halve malaria infection. 3) Reduce tuberculosis deaths by 90%. 4) Avoid 1.1 million HIV infections through circumcision. 5) Cut early death from chronic disease by 1/3. 6) Reduce newborn mortality by 70%. 7) Increase immunization to reduce child deaths by 25%. 8) Make family planning available to everyone. 9) Eliminate violence against women and girls. 10) Phase out fossil fuel subsidies. 11) Halve coral reef loss. 12) Tax pollution damage from energy. 13) Cut indoor air pollution by 20%. 14) Reduce trade restrictions. 15) Improve gender equality in ownership, business and politics. 16) Boost agricultural yield growth by 40%. 17) Increase girls’ education by two years. 18) Achieve universal primary education in sub-Saharan Africa. 19) Triple preschool enrollment in sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁸ With a few exceptions, these projects should have priority over others because of some of the worst levels of human development indicators apply to India.

There is also the need for perspective: how many more decades have to pass before elementary entitlements of a decent society such as drinking water, rudimentary sanitation, universal health, and free education are made available to the deprived? Rising expectations and discontent in not achieving a modicum of even simple but meaningful or full life have the potential of erupting out in unsettling ways. A less corruptible administration committed to the goal of ending deprivations is the urgent need.

Table 3: Impact of Promoting Gender Equality



Politically or economically implausible deeds need not to be done to attain both growth and equity. Earlier the case of Bangladesh’s ORS was mentioned in combating serious and endemic health issues. The exemplary benefits: costs ratios of the essential CCC projects have been mentioned above. Here is another example of clear-cut actions to promote both growth and reduce inequality. Table 3 above shows how worldwide gender parity in wages and emoluments could boost world GDP by \$28.4 trillion before 2025. This is possible when as simple an act as gender equality is allowed. Women need to be offered the same opportunities as men. This is as much as a 26 percent improvement on 2014 world GDP.¹⁹ The indicators considered for gender parity are labor force participation such as 40 percent in India, social equality, political representation and related measures.

IV. Needed: Onslaught on Deprivations

At the stage in which India finds itself it is beside the point to thrash out ideas such as growth versus equity. It is urgent that there is an onslaught on deprivations such as lack of drinking water, lack of toilets, quality primary, middle and high school education, imparting vocational skills sand basic health care to the poorest. They are fundamental human rights. The priority should be one of leveling the playing field so that none lacks the capability to take advantage of opportunities available and make the most of them to improve standards of living. India can afford to set aside enough resources to ensure basic needs listed above even as it allocates resources for infrastructure, irrigation, industrial facilities, IT expansion and all the rest. Simple executive actions such as promoting more gender parity, construction of toilets, promoting public health, accountability in administration and such others are all that are needed for leveling the field and promoting capability. These self-evident facts are metaphysical, humanistic as well as economic. Non-targeting the deprivations or ad hocism will condemn India to progress by trial and error which has been the historical truth since Independence. Deprivations will indefinitely perpetuate into the future. It would be a jarring set of priorities that would ignore the obvious deficiencies and continue to put faith in growth. Several well-intended deprivations-oriented programs have floundered in India because for every hundred rupees allotted for “public welfare” just 14 rupees reach the target population, rest obviously ending up in the wrong hands. This is a serious governance issue and a special task force that is not interested in personal aggrandizement should be entrusted with ending deprivations such as drinking water, toilets, malnutrition and illiteracy.

Abhijit Banerjee et al found the most effective way to end deprivations and boost livelihoods, health and incomes: transfer assets such as livestock or goods for trade, train the poor to manage the assets effectively, undertake frequent mentoring and coaching, provide health education and so forth for a period of at least two years. These are the conclusions of a 6-country 7-year study of some 21,000 families deprived of basics like healthcare and nutrition, and most importantly lacking in morale.²⁰ This is called the Graduation model of poverty alleviation and its needs to be replicated by non-bureaucrats for effective outcomes. To uplift 50m households it would cost one percent of GDP or \$414 per household.²¹ This is an urgent task to sustain India's future. There is also the moral viewpoint.²² Future generations should not be burdened by the same problem of underdevelopment of the lower fifth of population on account of neglect by the better off.

V. Conclusions

Post-Picketty deliberations have opened up numerous discussions, covering all aspects of growth and inequality, including the Pareto distribution, corrections to growth, growth and inequality trajectories in India, USA and China. India's growth has been impeded by outrageous deprivations even decades after India's independence. Ending deficiencies in water supply, nutrition, sanitation, healthcare, and education cannot wait any longer. Growth need not take a back seat for this sake. Proper sequencing of projects and their funding so that projects that have benefits some 15-20 times more than costs would diminish deprivations. Lack of accountability in Indian administration has been a serious depravity. The divide between Sen et al and Bhagawati et al relates to perceptions of inequalities. Sen's is inclusive of deprivations, whereas Bhagawati's is related more to inequalities, which can be reduced to some extent by growth but not without the caveat of Will Rogers' 'trickle down' theory.

In Bhagawati's case the desperation for ending deprivations is not articulated. This is fine for growth per se, but somewhat jarring for diminishing India's persistent deprivations. So far this has been sought to be taken care of by half-hearted implementation and sloganeering: Garibi Hatao, Aam Admi, Jawahar Gram Samridhi Yojana, Integrated Rural Development Scheme, TRYSEM (Training Rural Youth for Self-Employment), Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA) and others which evidently have not made a dent on monstrous deprivations such as drinking water, basic healthcare and education and so forth. A special force accountable for expenditures should be entrusted with the task of frontal assault on deprivations so that India does not continue to be a third world nation with sizeable illiteracy and malnutrition. There are serious governance issues especially in states that drag the appalling averages down for the country. Non-growth prospects in the context of global warming have not been dealt with. India and others in similar economic circumstances are pleading for "carbon space" so that its people may have a modicum of growth with no deprivations. Technology may help chart new pathways that do not depend on drawing on underground carbon, minimizing pollution. Positive-sum games in this realm are still possible for all, but the immediate concern is one of ending deprivations which are not zero-sum results even for the privileged. It is still possible to endure increasing inequalities as long as deprivations, glaring as they are, are ended. This is priority one. Everything else is credibly secondary.

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