Poverty in India

In the half century since its independence, India has accomplished many notable social and economic achievements. Some of these are the eradication of widespread famine, a reduction in population growth, some lowering of caste barriers to economic opportunity and the creation of a large pool of technical and scientific talent. Despite these advancements, poverty imposes an oppressive weight on India, especially in the rural areas where almost three out of four Indians and 77 percent of India is poor (Mondal). India has managed to reduce poverty since 1975, but since the growth of India has accelerated, the decline in poverty has been fairly steady (Causes). This pace remains slow and uneven and government efforts to reduce poverty through direct anti-interventions have yielded mixed results. Many of these programs have missed their intended target, the poor, and benefitted the more economically advantaged. The overall number of poor in India continues to increase and is becoming a larger hurdle day by day. Poverty is like a disease to other problems that arise such as crime, low-paced development, drug abuse, etc. There are still a large number of people in India who still live on the streets and beg the entire day to just get one meal. Children who end up being born into poverty are unable to attend school and are forced to help their families survive. With this, the vicious cycle of poor health, lack of education and more poverty keeps increasing. While poverty is a dire situation, it is by no means a lost cause. The root to
this problem can be explained by a few main causes. The prevalence of poverty in India is due to a couple major factors including demographic factors, like population and economic factors, like agriculture.

India is the second most populous country in the world and because of this, demographic factors play a key role in the economy of India and contribute toward the widespread poverty. This rapid population growth aggravates the poverty of the people due to the limited resources available. The growth of the population in India exceeds the rate of growth in national income. Population growth also lowers the per capita income, which tends to increase poverty (Kaur). The burden of this reduction in per capita income in taken on heavily by the poor people. Further more, the quickly growing population has a higher demand for more jobs that is not being met. Manufacturing, when well handled, has the potential to provide hundreds of millions of jobs to workers migrating from the rural area to the city or other areas. Currently, the services and especially the information technology and finance sector do not employ a large amount of people even though this tertiary sector represents almost half of India’s GDP (Kaur). It only employs two million people, which in relation to the total population of India, is not a large enough number (Causes). A failure to address the growing population and meet the needs of this growing population is enhancing poverty.

Another demographic issue is the very evident caste breakdown. Even though the caste system is not formally stated or in use anymore, many of the associations still have an effect today, especially in rural areas. The “scheduled castes” is a designation given to the lowest caste, consisting of those formerly associated with the label “untouchables. (Rao)” A second lower caste is the “scheduled tribes.” This group of aboriginal people
generally rejects the caste system and chooses to reside in jungles, forests and mountains (Rao). Approximately 180 million to 220 million people are considered to be in these two lower castes in India. In 1998, 54.2 percent of the scheduled castes and 62.2 percent of the scheduled tribes were living below the poverty line (Causes). These lower castes are often viewed in negative regards and therefore not offered well-paying jobs that would help them escape poverty. Not only are they not offered jobs, but most are also forbidden to hold jobs because they are untouchables and essentially do not have many rights (Rao). Because most are left to work off the debts of their ancestors, they end up working in slave labor. They are wired to believe that they deserve nothing and therefore expect nothing in life (Rao). Their hard work in most cases does not pay off because higher castes refuse to buy products touched by an untouchable. This is due to the notion that existed earlier that even a simple glance at an untouchable affect your own higher caste position and somehow result in a decrease in caste level in the next life. Another rule within the caste system is that one cannot marry outside his or her own caste (Rao). This makes it difficult for people of lower castes to escape poverty when they are not given the proper resources to do so. Because of this discrimination and work oppression, it is difficult for most people of lower castes to build a steady income to escape poverty.

In a country like India, agriculture is a key source of food and jobs, but plays one of the biggest roles in the high incidence of poverty in India. About 80 percent of people depend on agriculture, but farmers are poor and uneducated and therefore, are not trained in the modern methods of farming (Mondal). There are little to no good facilities for irrigation and seeds and fertilizers do not always arrive on time. The yield is low and results in agriculture not being profitable today. India’s backward agriculture has the
lowest productivity per hectare and per capita (Singh). This low per capita is not only due to huge population, but also due to low productivity, which is only 64 percent of the world average (Mondal). The productivity potential of Indian agriculture has been demonstrated in a state called Punjab, where it is nearly equal to those of developed countries. If all of India attained the same productivity level of Punjab, the national income of India would be more than double what it is now (Singh). This low productivity of Indian agriculture is attributed to the small size of landholdings. Land and other forms of assets constitute sources of income for the rural people. Unfortunately, the unequal distribution of land and other assets in the Indian economy has taken a toll on the people living in poverty (Singh). The size distribution of operational holdings suggests a very high degree of concentration in the ownership of a few farmers leading to poverty of many in the rural sector.

The most significant cause of poverty in India is the existence of the caste system. If poverty is going to be addressed, this should be taken into consideration the most because even if the other two problems are fixed, not much will change until the caste system is addressed. The population of India will continue growing and the children born into the families of the lower castes will remain in those castes until social views of these castes change. Because people in the lower castes tend to have more children, essentially the number of people in the lower castes would continue to increase. The population has been predicted to stop growing by 2050, so addressing it now would not do much to help (Plataforma). Because the population is going to plateau at some point, it is better to address other issues and let issues like population growth fix themselves. While improving agricultural productivity might help the impoverished, they will still remain in
a constant state of poverty unless they are given the resources and education to get out of poverty. But because of the perception of the untouchables, they are not given the education they need to live a successful life. If this issue was addressed, the untouchables would be able to be just as prosperous as any other person and they could make a better life for themselves.

While the caste issue is obviously an important issue, some might argue that it is not the one that should be addressed. These people might argue that because the caste system has been such an important way of identifying people for the past hundreds of years, it should be kept in the social system. While they do make a valid point, there is always a time for social change. America has made a lot of change in terms of perceptions towards certain groups, so there is no reason why India cannot do the same. Regardless of caste, even the untouchables are human too and they deserve to be seen in that regard.

Poverty in India has been an issue for far too long now and the root to this problem seems to fall under two main categories, demographic problems and economic factors. It is a well-known fact that India has the second largest population in the world and this does not come without effects. The quickly growing population has growing needs that are not being met at the same rate as the population growth. The next and most important demographic issue is the existence of the caste system and society’s perception and treatment of the lower castes. The lower castes are viewed in such negative regards that they are not given access to any resources that would enable them to escape poverty. There entire lives are spent working off the debts off the previous family members and working without being paid for the work they do, which almost qualifies as slavery. The
third cause of poverty is the agriculture system. Most of the agricultural farmers are those in poverty and therefore are not educated in the current methods of agriculture. This results in a very low yield and a low agricultural productivity. These causes, if addressed, could potentially lead to a much different India where the poverty rate is much lower and society has more to offer for everyone.
Works Cited


Plataforma SINC. “A model predicts that the world’s populations will stop growing in 2050.” ScienceDaily. ScienceDaily, 4 April 2013.
