

## **An Analysis of the Implications of Economic Inequalities on Poverty in the USA and India**

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### **Abstract**

*There are shreds of evidence that economic inequality is exacerbating poverty and extreme poverty around the world. Various research and global surveys have shown that the gap between the rich and the poor is growing higher everywhere in the world, surprisingly both in the most impoverished countries and in the most developed countries. United States of America is thought to be the unparalleled economic superpower in the world whereas India is believed to be one of the rising economic giants in the world. Looking at the economic development in the USA and India, it could have been assumed that it has uplifted the number of poor living below the poverty margin. But, in reality, most of the poor are getting marginalized by unequal treatment of neo-liberal economic aspirations and government policies. This study on economic inequalities in the USA also concluded similar findings showing how the poor are getting demoted and being deprived of necessities like healthcare, education, minimum wages etc which aggravated their poverty. On the other hand, the Indian scenario, which is the home to the largest number of poor in the world, shows similar or even crueller stories of income inequalities worsening poverty. This research is done on secondary data sources, viz – different national and international surveys, research outcomes, diverse kinds of literature, case studies etc. The qualitative approach of this study sheds light on the crucial linkages between inequality and poverty which is concluded in finding pathways to deal with poverty-reduction policies both in poor and developed countries.*

**Keywords: Inequality; Economic Inequality; Poverty; Inequality in USA; Inequality in India**

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## Introduction

Renowned philosophers Friedrich Hegel, Karl Marx, and Amartya Sen understood poverty as a social phenomenon (Lubasz, 1976; Marx, 1894; Sen, 1983) whereas Mahatma Gandhi, the founding father of the India, identified poverty as the worst violence against humanity (Hill, 2014). On the other hand, Joseph Stiglitz identified inequality as a choice by uttering — “*Inequality is a choice, and by that I mean that it's not the inexorable result of economic forces, demand and supply, globalization*” (Joseph Stiglitz, 2016). He also thought inequality isn't that obvious and indicated we shouldn't take it for granted. Ranging from faster to slower, the economy of the countries around the world is growing quicker than ever. People are enjoying the fruits of technological innovations in every inch and out and getting economic prosperity. Nevertheless, quite disturbingly, economic inequalities are getting widened with these economic prosperities (Sala-i-Martin, 2002). It is often said that the Industrial Revolution was the kick-off for global inequalities (Qureshi, 2016) meanwhile historians found evidence of inequalities even in the most primitive societies (Harari, 2014). Economic inequalities, composed of income inequality, wealth inequalities etc. are often taken as poor countries' problems (Alvaredo et al., 2018; Stiglitz, 2016) however it is a universal phenomenon having immense implications both in the rich and poor countries. In addition to that, extreme poverty is yet very common worldwide. According to the United States of America (USA), census report 2023, about 12.5% of people live below the poverty line and it had the highest one-year rise in the year 2021 (Time, 2023). Professor Yunus, the Nobel laureate economist and father of microcredit financing viewed USA poverty as a miserable shadow under the skyscrapers of extremely rich people (Yunus, 2009b). He opined that poor people are created by unequal treatment of the systems and the society and thus, they remain “*Bonsai People*” (Yunus, 2009a). Regardless of having merit, qualities, and potentialities, the poor can't grow up due to the unequal treatments of the existing social and economic structure. This concept sheds light on the origins of poverty; unequal and inequitable treatment are the foremost reasons behind poverty. In the cases of multidimensional poverty (MDP), or child poverty (CP), it is also found that all are the failure of income and wealth distribution and redistribution policies of the government (Alkire et al., 2015; Orton & Rowlingson, 2007). So, both poverty and inequality are allegedly the products of distribution and redistribution patterns of the public policies adopted by the state structures. J. K. Rowling, the bestseller English novelist and creator of the novel ‘Harry Potter’, gave a brief in-depth analysis of MDP as quoted below—

*“Poverty entails fear, and stress, and sometimes depression; it means a thousand petty humiliations and hardships. Climbing out of poverty by your own efforts, that is indeed something on which to pride yourself, but poverty itself is romanticised only by fools.”*  
(Harvard Gazette, 2008)

This essay attempts to critically analyse the trends of income inequality both in the rich and poor countries to dig out deeper their impacts on the global efforts to eliminate poverty. One national case study is drawn from the United States of America (USA) to be representative of the rich countries, and another is drawn from India which is the home of more than 240 million poor people (UNDP, 2023) regardless of being a rising economic superpower. It found that the world is grasped by economic inequalities which are deteriorating every day and its increasing adverse impacts on poverty, MDP, and CP. Making an academic probe into the evidence, it surprisingly discovered the shadow in our thoughts that we are successful in breaking the shackles of poverty, whilst some deep-grown inequality and MDP are still killing millions.

### **Linking Economic Inequality and Elimination of Poverty**

Poverty has a contiguous correlation with inequality. Most poverty researchers agree that poverty is primarily originated from inequality or unequal patterns of income and wealth distribution (Alvaredo et al., 2018; A. B. Atkinson, 2015; T. Atkinson, 2002; Gunasinghe et al., 2021; Schulte, 2002; Yunus, 2009a). To attach poverty to inequality further, Pete Alcock thought— '*Poverty is the unacceptable face of inequality*' (Orton & Rowlingson, 2007, p. 60). But what is academically 'unacceptable', is well prevailed around the world in a mounting trend. Studying economic inequality is the foremost effort to eliminate poverty as inequality is not just an economic issue, but rather a far-reaching policy dispute (Doyle & Stiglitz, 2014, p. 7). Over the years, the elimination of poverty is a bustling policy agenda of the modern states (Squire, 1993, p. 380). After the world completed the tenure to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), successes in eliminating the rate of extreme poverty were praiseworthy. However, efforts to address MDP are not yet satisfactory. Amartya Sen, the veteran Nobel laureate economist who is thought to have pioneering works on the concept of MDP (Duclos et al., 2006), included indicators like health, education, living standard, and household environment etc. as some of its dimensions (Dehury & Mohanty, 2015). A dynamic economy works as an intrinsic factor of any society, economic inequality pushes a group of people into MDP. A higher economic solvency is even proportional to better wellbeing and longer life expectancy (Chetty et al., 2016), where nature itself plays unfairly. Good health and a longer life enable a person to work hard and attain prosperity. We find some economic biases even in the policymaking atmosphere. For example, even in the most democratic regimes, elected representatives behave more attentively to a wealthy constituent than to a poor one— generating a policymaking asymmetry (Larry M. Bartels, 2008). This can be termed as a '*policymaking inequality*' inside the government apparatuses. Let's have a close look at the statistics on how the world is unequal in case of wealth and

income. The global data by the World Economic Forum (WEF) measured by Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) shows that the top 10% of the richest people share 52% of the total income and 76% of total wealth of the world. Whereas the bottom 50% of the world population shares 8.5% of the total income and only 2% of the total wealth. In between, the middle 40% of the world population shares 39.5% of income and 22% of wealth (WEF, 2023).

From the aforementioned literature and statistics, it can be summed up that economic inequality is one of the central causes of poverty. So, any effort to eliminate poverty needs to be interconnected with the tactics to combat inequality first. For a better understanding of poverty, MDP, and inequality, we need to focus on three basic conceptual approaches. Firstly — we need to cognise whether it is a ‘problem of poverty’ or a ‘problem with riches’ (Patten, 2005). As Tawney described it in a meaningful way—“*what thoughtful rich people call the problem of poverty, thoughtful poor people call with equal justice a problem of riches*” (Orton & Rowlingson, 2007, p. 59). It is very important to understand how the rich and the poor view the ‘problem of poverty’ or ‘problem of riches’ from two different viewpoints. We sometimes misleadingly view poverty looking only at the poor. It can rather be ‘a problem of riches’ in which wealth flows from richer to richer intermittently and cyclically. From this diversion, political and policy solutions to eliminate poverty will differ distinctively. Secondly— the rationale of bringing solutions to inequality in the elimination of poverty might be very important. Moreover, “*Inequality is a problem because wealth causes poverty*” and “*Inequality is a problem because the process by which some people become rich is unjust*” (Orton & Rowlingson, 2007, p. 62). As a matter of fact, with top-heavy income distributions, the rich usually spend a smaller portion of their income than the poor contributing to slowing down the economy (Doyle & Stiglitz, 2014, p. 7). Thirdly— wealth distribution and redistribution policies have been a major concern to eliminate global poverty. We find evidence that not having proper distributive and redistributive government policies gave rise to economic inequalities in OECD countries (Gunasinghe et al., 2021). Questions arise whether capitalist market economies, where all the factors of production should compete in an open, competitive, and level-playing field irrespective of being originated from dissimilar and unequal backgrounds, is an impediment to alleviating poverty or not? (Stiglitz, 2015). Vis-à-vis, the opposite debate is whether socialist economies discourage people from working hard for better production and make some more money from the worthy and talented population or not. Albeit we find poverty and inequality are interconnected and decoupled from diverse perspectives.

### Cases and Trends of Economic Inequality in the USA

The amount of economic inequality, socio-economic gaps in survival, and poverty have risen in the USA over the last four decades. The income of the wealthiest 10% has risen to 50% in 2014 from 33% in 1978 (Bor et al., 2017). Now, the USA has the highest level of economic inequality amongst the countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) where the USA is always in the leading role (Bor et al., 2017; Smeeding, 2005). If we look at the World Inequality Index (WII) data (see Figure-1 below) — we see the gap between the richest 1% and the bottom 50% is increasing as high as it rose in the Cold War era. This escalation specifies a grim summation of the MDP and economic inequalities in the USA. The measurement of poverty in the USA is yet based on the person's monetary income whereas poverty is globally thought to be the deprivation of multiple factors (Dhonde & Haveman, 2017; Folch & Laird, 2024). A survey done in the USA in 2017 shows, the percentage of MDP was 13.7% whilst the official poverty measurement said it was 13.1%. This 2017 survey also exposed the highest poverty among Asian, Hispanic, and elderly people whereas official data pointed out that black and young persons have the highest level of poverty (Folch & Laird, 2024). This significant variation in the measurement impedes to understand the true picture of MDP and economic inequalities. In addition to that, CP is relatively higher in the USA compared to similarly developed countries which makes it a pressing need to be immediately addressed (McCarty, 2016). In the year 2014, about 15.5 million children, 21.1% of the total children of the country under the age of 18 (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2014), were living below the central poverty line, with higher intensity of inequality amongst the youngest fragment of them.

Health and wellbeing, which is another indicator to measure MDP, is substandard among the poor and unequal societies of the USA. The US population health data says— life expectancy has risen among the middle income and high-income people although it remained immobile among poor people (Bor et al., 2017, p. 1475). At the same time, growing survival gaps in percentages of real income show that there is a fall in real income of the poor drawing a vital correlation between the low income and poor health (Bor et al., 2017, p. 1476). With the increasing fall in the real income of the poor, the chances of accessing digital technologies were unequal. Health risk factors such as smoking, and obesity remained usual amongst the poor Americans while geographical segregation of income promoted concerns like reduced economic mobility, mass incarceration, increased exposure, and a reduction in accessing the high cost of healthcare. This population health study with data spanning four decades shows that the rise of economic inequality has produced multiple other socio-economic problems, especially health poverty which may further threaten a survival crisis for the poor. Bor et al., (2017) summarized the overall situation as— “*Having*

*missed out on decades of income growth and longevity gains, low-income Americans are increasingly left behind*". With widening economic inequality and limited access of the poor to healthcare and technological facilities, Bor et al., (2017) forecasted that there might be a "*healthpoverty trap*" in this 21<sup>st</sup> century contributing to the already toughening socio-economic inequalities of the poor. Regardless of having number of poverty alleviation strategies and programmes, e.g. Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit etc. (CPSP, 2024), income inequality has put the poor into hot water for survival. Health inequality can composite existing parities/disparities of wellbeing according to income (Kawachi et al., 2002; Woodward & Kawachi, 2000).

### **Cases and Trends of Economic Inequality in India**

In India, about 248 million people live below the poverty line (UNDP, 2023) although the country has secured 5<sup>th</sup> largest economy in the world (Forbes India, 2024). It is the home to the largest number of poor in a single country and the level of extreme poverty is even visible by bare eyes. Economic inequality in India has risen to a worrisome stage as the country is extremely divided into rich and poor. A study conducted on the six major states namely Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, and West Bengal of India shows— about 43% of the Indian population are Multidimensional Poor and the average poor is 45.5% with some regional deviations. The presence of this huge poverty and MDP have made India even poorer and more vulnerable than any other country, irrespective of being an economic stronghold (Alok, 2020). Researchers accused the Indian system of measuring poverty and MDP is even questionable. Until 2005, India used the measurement of the calorific amount of food that people are capable of buying ranging from 1800 to 2400 kilo calories per capita (Gordon & Nandy, 2016). Later it changed measurement into another system named Poverty Line Basket (PLB) which was still criticised for setting a very low level of earning to measure poverty. The prevalent poverty measurement system is based on the calorie intake system again (about 2100 calories per day) which still fails to address the multidimensional characteristics of poverty. It is evidently proved that the amount of food and money aren't the only yardsticks to measure poverty. Besides, child poverty in India is also shocking as children are getting impeded to grow up to the fullest and often being deprived of their basic rights. An estimated number of '*one in five births in the world*' takes place in India (Gordon & Nandy, 2016). Children in poor families are being born with insecurities about clean drinking water, safe toilets, and access to proper health care and schooling. Inequality in healthcare is also very high varying in different geographic locations or states. We see life expectancy in Madhya Pradesh is 56 years whereas it is 74 years in Kerala (Balarajan et al., 2011).

From the British colonial period to till date, inequality in India has been ever-present with an insignificant fall from the 1950s to the 1970s (Chancel & Piketty, 2019), but It has reached a record high level now. The ‘development and pro-development policies’ are often blamed for this ongoing rise which isn’t yet studied methodologically to excavate the realities(Sehrawat & Giri, 2015). With this large sum of economic inequalities and poverty, India is becoming a dreadful graveyard of socio-economic inequalities (D’Souza, 1975; Krishnan, 2005; Thapliyal et al., 2019).

### **Analysing the Recent Trends Economic Inequality Between and within the Nations**

By bits and pieces, the economic inequality around the world is rising. In recent years, the world has observed the highest income gaps both in rich and poor countries (Dabla-Norris et al., 2015) with escalating economic disparities sheering in the developing countries (Bor et al., 2017; Meschi & Vivarelli, 2009; Ravallion, 2014). In the last three decades, income inequality has risen in the USA, Germany, the UK and Japan by the percentage of 29%, 17%, 14% and 11% (Stiglitz, 2016, p. 137). World Economic Forum (WEF) summarized similar findings in their Global Risk Report 2023 showing the rising income inequalities around the world as a potential risk factor that might be heightened over time (WEF, 2023).

From a regional perspective, if we look at the trend of income inequality and poverty in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, we see grave inequalities for decades which gave birth to countless social and political uprisings including the ‘Arab Spring’ (Ncube et al., 2014, p. 435). Few researchers argue that the Arab Spring was a repercussion of deep political and economic inequality (Klasen, 2018) while others just see it as the result of a broken ‘social contract’ (Devarajan & Ianchovichina, 2018). We know the social contract is the cohesive power of a society that is built up through centuries with a sense of belongingness in the society. Also, those uprising was a refusal of the social elites in power for their long records of socio-political oppression, deprivation, and inequalities (Ncube et al., 2014).

The underlying fact is— income inequality has a dramatic impact on everybody’s life, not just on the poor. The case studies of this essay (of India and the USA) show how countries with strong economies can suffer from the inequality traps within their nation. (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009) provided a long list of evidence in this regard and showed how economic inequality has impacted all the populaces. For example— social violence, homicide, political riots, and lack of trust in each other are more common in societies with higher inequalities. The story of the uprising in the MENA states between 1985-2009 (e.g. Arab

Spring) is the proof on behalf of evidence and argument provided by (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). Another major study on Latin American countries showed a strong negative correlation between economic inequality and economic growth (More & Aye, 2017). It also summed up that the incidents of income inequality are not only bad for social indicators but may also push the '*economic growth backward*' of the nation itself. The assessment of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP) by IMF also proved such a negative correlation and proved '*pushing the growth backward*' theory. Evidence from other developing countries is also similar to MENA and Latin countries. We see that despite the higher growth in most developing countries (e.g. India) and initial successes in eliminating extreme poverty, these countries have been over-burdened with economic inequality since 2000 (Ravallion, 2014). India is a first-rate example of such a phenomenon. The most recent trend of people stepping down to poverty again from a solvent background in Bangladesh is thought to take place due to an increasing and invisible economic inequality in the society (Debapriya Bhattacharya, 2024). On the contrary, some recent studies claim the opposite bringing up the argument that income inequalities can sometimes be promotive for the economy (De Dominicis et al., 2008; Peterson, 2017) although the majority of scholars didn't yet agree with such findings. These scholars summarized their findings saying economic inequality sometimes works as the inflation case of the economy; having a moderate rate of it mobilises the growth. Regardless of this counterargument, it is almost unanimously approved that economic inequality hinders the quality and sustainability the growth between and within nations.

### **Implications of the Trends of Economic Inequality to Poverty Elimination**

Given the facts brought out in the theoretical discussions, case studies, and trends of economic inequality and global poverty, we see economic inequalities are on the rise and its impacting poverty and MDP both in the rich and poor countries. Looking back at the figures and statistics of the recent decades, we find evidence supporting this unpleasant fact (Gunasinghe et al., 2021; Stiglitz, 2016; WEF, 2023; WID, 2022). United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) found a similar interesting fact that in poverty and inequality reduction strategies, our focus is always based on poverty or poor countries. In fact, it was necessary to be based on riches and the distribution of wealth as rich countries have been successful in eradicating poverty for so long (UNRISD, 2010). UNRISD further argued that those poverty-centric analyses often don't consider exploring key dimensions like institutions, politics and policymaking aspects that may be responsible for the reduction of poverty and inequality. Such a predetermined conceptual approach prescribes insubstantial or unattainable recommendations to eliminate poverty. The United Nations' Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were the first of their kind



where all the nations in the United Nations (UN) agreed to a global commitment to different goals to meet by 2015 with the specific target of halving poverty. This goal of eliminating poverty was mostly met at the global level nonetheless not in all the member countries that signed MDGs (Doyle & Stiglitz, 2014, p. 6). Another turning point in the efforts to eliminate poverty took place after 2000 when governments around the world started adopting PRSPs prescribed by the International Monetary Funds(IMF)(IMF, 2016; Theodore H. Cohn & Anil Hira, 2021). PRSPs directed governments around the world to formulate poverty reduction strategies centred on a comprehensive understanding of the facts of how social, economic, and financial factors contribute to poverty(Amar et al., 2020, p. 25). PRSPs also followed the three key Human Poverty Indices (HPI) which are deprivation of life, basic right to education, and provision of economies. The results of adopting these strategies were massive as the world reduced poverty in large numbers according to the Human Development Index (HDI) of 2013. In the third index of HPI, we observe the crucial link between development and access to economic means(Ncube et al., 2014) which indicates reducing economic inequalities.

Living in a world with high economic inequality limits the opportunity of the poor to access the means of production equally, resulting in a vicious circle of poverty for them. Reducing inequalities has multi-faceted benefits in the steps of eliminating poverty. (Doyle & Stiglitz, 2014) claimed that the social benefits of reducing inequalities are overwhelming as it gives people a feeling of inclusiveness in a fair, cohesive, and mobile society. This sentiment makes people hardworking with their fullest potential bolstering the human capital in the society. Thus, eliminating multidimensional poverty highly depends on addressing economic inequality. The cases of multidimensional poverty either in the USA or in India exemplify — despite having economic growth, countries may lack sustainable and saturated economic progress for their populaces. Excessive inequality tends to create political instabilities and anarchies that result in breaking the social equilibrium of a ‘just society’ as was seen in the case of MENA countries. This melting point of social justice and equality should be furthered to practice governance, policy implementation, public health, and wellbeing(Arimah, 2004), especially in the actions to eliminate poverty.

### **Concluding Remarks**

There is no one best way to combat poverty (UNRISD, 2010) in a world where more than 800 million people still live below the poverty line earning less than 1.25\$ per day (Joint SDG Fund, 2024). This essay explicitly communicated with prominent research on economic inequalities and poverty drawing case studies from two countries that are highly important for poverty research. We see that economic inequalities are really big disturbances to eradicate poverty, and it

is on the rise in almost everywhere of the globe. Before taking any policy to eradicate poverty, we have to take strategies to address inequality. Otherwise, existing structures, social cohesion, and social contract will not allow the policy on eliminating poverty to work well and eradicate poverty from its roots. The precarious scenes from India showed us how an economic giant can possess such a risky amount of poverty and inequality in all its social hierarchies. Again, the case of the USA showed us how people are being marginalized and falling into a poverty trap with all the insecurities despite having been in a wealthy country. Above all, we observed that the world has successfully eradicated an astounding amount of poverty. We have reduced more poverty in the last 50 years than in the previous 500 years (UNDP Facts on Poverty, 2024). It is possible to eliminate it from the roots if proper strategies are set to address the issues of inequality and MDP first.

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