

# Understanding Poverty and Inequality in Urban India since Reforms

## Bringing Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches Together

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Having grown considerably in the past two decades, Indian cities have become highly unequal spaces – economically, spatially, socially and culturally. Both quantitative approaches and qualitative methods have been used to study and measure the rising levels of inequality and the extent of poverty of the cities. While both have their problems, this paper claims that notwithstanding their respective limitations, these two approaches have captured different dimensions of the complex Indian urban process, even if they have rarely made an effort to speak to each other. The authors offer their own perspective on how these approaches can learn from each other and move forward.

### 1 Introduction

The urban process<sup>1</sup> in India is fundamentally constitutive of the high growth that India has been witnessing since the 1980s. This process has received major impetus from the influx of agrarian capital into the cities from the 1980s onwards, the consolidation and growth of old and new urban capital, as well as the entry of foreign capital since the 1990s (Damodaran 2008; RBI 2012 and various issues). State investments of a facilitating kind (for example, urban infrastructure, as opposed to state-owned enterprises) have increased, too. Cities have witnessed significant in-migrations of working populations from agricultural hinterlands since colonial times (Chandravarkar 2006), and this process has intensified further in recent decades (Shrivastava 2011). City spaces have also undergone rapid reconfigurations over the last two or three decades with the emergence of wealthy enclaves and new towns (Bhattacharya and Sanyal 2011), which have tended to be located away from older parts of the cities, viewed as congested, mixed (for example, in terms of income) and largely unplanned (or not amenable to modern planning). Across Indian cities, there has also been a significant growth in slums and pockets of poor neighbourhoods that house the poorer recent migrants and the older urban poor.

All the above processes have coalesced in such a way that Indian cities have become highly unequal over the last two decades – economically, spatially, socially and culturally (Motiram and Vakulabharanam 2012; Vakulabharanam 2012; Zacharias and Vakulabharanam 2011). Quantitative approaches,<sup>2</sup> using large macro surveys and measures, which have been relatively more popular with economists, do reflect these rising urban inequality levels. By all anecdotal accounts, Indian cities are also characterised by high levels of poverty, and what has been achieved (if at all) on the front of poverty reduction is modest. However, there is no consensus on the question of poverty.

It is important to understand at the outset that there are several problems with the quantitative approaches. On the question of poverty (urban or rural) in India, there is considerable controversy and disagreement on basic questions such as: How many poor are out there? What is the trend/rate of changes in poverty? On the question of inequality, too, there are strong reasons to believe that there is serious underestimation of both the levels and increases in inequality (Jayadev et al 2007). In

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general, scholars using quantitative approaches have tended to focus on macro databases that come with a claim of an “objective” representation of reality, when it is not at all clear if such a strong claim can be justified. There could be problems concerning how representative these data samples are of the whole population; whether the questions in the surveys are equally comprehensible to all respondents; whether these questions adequately reflect the agency of the respondents; and whether the mechanisms involved in social dynamics can be unearthed through these questions. Also, similar looking macro/statistical outcomes of poverty or inequality may hide the varied mechanisms that produce these outcomes. Therefore, quantitative approaches alone are not adequate to make sense of these deeper phenomena, which require an appreciation of the structural and historical context in which the present-day urban centre is located.

In our reading, the qualitative literature (for example, from geography, anthropology, sociology or political science),<sup>3</sup> which has mostly relied on research methods such as ethnography, participant observation and spatial mapping, has been very insightful in contextualising the changes that we are witnessing in urban India, and in engaging with the actual processes and mechanisms, and with the diversity and heterogeneity that characterises the urban. However, these approaches are rooted in particular traditions, with their own blind spots. Although there are notable exceptions, these studies have tended to focus on micro contexts (for example, particular slums) without investing adequate effort into theorising the relations between these micro contexts and the larger macro context. We also perceive a contradictory set of tendencies among these studies. On the one hand, there is a strong belief that it is epistemologically unfeasible to go beyond the subjective, and the micro contexts. On the other, there is also a tendency to theorise the entire social totality from a micro-study, which may produce a whole range of conflicting claims that are somewhat impossible to resolve rigorously or satisfactorily. As a result, this literature is characterised by a deep fragmentation, from which a coherent picture of the larger social reality is somewhat hard to construct.

In this paper, which is intended for a broad audience of social scientists and policymakers, one of our claims is that notwithstanding their respective limitations, these two (that is, quantitative and qualitative) approaches have captured different dimensions of the complex Indian urban process, even if they have rarely made an effort to speak to each other. We present below (Sections 2 and 3) both the insights provided by an analysis of the larger macro databases, as well as the insights from various qualitative and conceptual approaches to produce a richer account of the questions of equity and justice in the Indian urban context. We also offer our own perspective (in Section 4) on how these approaches can learn from each other and move forward.

## 2 Quantitative Approaches

Our focus in this section is on studies that have used large, nationally representative databases (National Sample Surveys (NSS), Census, and National Family Health Surveys (NFHS)) to

understand urban poverty and inequality in India. There is an abundance of such studies, so given the restrictions of space, we survey this literature selectively. We focus on more recent studies (that have appeared since the late 1990s) and present the latest available evidence on the extent, trends and determinants of poverty, and the mechanisms through which it persists.

### Do We Know Anything Definitive about Urban Poverty?

We first look at the studies that have tried to estimate the number of urban poor, the rate/extent of urban poverty and their trends. In the money-metric or unidimensional approach, which is by far the dominant one and on which controversies have centred,<sup>4</sup> a poverty line in monetary terms is postulated and various measures (for example, the percentage of people below the poverty line, viz, the head count ratio (HCR)) are computed, based upon this. At the outset, we should acknowledge that any discussion of this approach has to be conducted in the shadow of the recent controversy on official poverty lines (that is, the recommendations of the Tendulkar Committee). There has been a series of critiques (for example, Subramanian 2011; Suryanarayana 2011; Swaminathan 2010), and there is near consensus now that the methodology adopted by this committee is shown to be flawed – essentially, there is no consistent norm that one can discern, beyond an attempt to find a poverty line that would result in a poverty rate perceived as reasonable, that is, neither too high nor too low. In a way, the government itself has recognised these problems, since it has recently appointed a new committee (chaired by Rangarajan) to set a new poverty line.

In a lucid and comprehensive account, Subramanian (2011) has shown how this is but the latest chapter in a long saga of problems and inconsistencies that have plagued the setting of Indian official poverty lines since Independence. There are several details (which interested readers can refer to in Subramanian 2011), but in the interests of space, we skip these and illustrate one important controversy. The method suggested by the 1993 expert group involved rural and urban poverty lines for a “base year” (1973-74), and the updating of these lines regularly based upon the prevailing prices. The poverty lines for the base year were set (based upon results from the NSS consumption expenditure survey for 1973-74) so that they corresponded to a minimum calorie requirement (2,100 and 2,400 kcal for urban and rural areas, respectively), although the correspondence of these lines with these requirements was rough (at best). The problem with this approach is that if one agrees with it, one is equally justified in taking any year (and not just 1973-74) as the base year and using this procedure of updating. Put simply, for the year that one is interested in, one could just examine the proportion of people who fail to meet the calorie requirement to obtain the HCR. This is problematic since, depending upon the base year chosen, the trends and extent of poverty differ.

Choosing an official base year (1973-74) provides the comforting trend of a secular decline in urban poverty using NSS consumption expenditure surveys. This is what many scholars

(including us; for example, Sen and Himanshu 2004a, 2004b; Himanshu 2006) have found using official poverty lines and NSS surveys on monthly consumption expenditure. The all-India urban HCR has declined from about 42-44% (various estimates) in 1983 to about 26% in 2004-05. However, Patnaik (2007: Table 2) uses the same data and takes a direct approach by looking at the proportion of people in urban areas who fall short of the nutrition norm of 2,100 kcal. She finds that this proportion has declined from 58.5% in 1983 to 57% in 1993-94, but then increased to 64.5% in 2004-05. From the above discussion, it is clear that one could claim that the official methodology is consistent with both these trends (and several others).

Other estimates are available for this period (based upon the NSS Employment and Unemployment Surveys) from the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS). The NCEUS was constituted in 2004 by the then United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government to investigate and report on the conditions of the informal sector. It estimates that in 2004-05, the unorganised sector<sup>5</sup> contributed about half of the GDP (NCEUS 2008: Table 2), and that unorganised workers<sup>6</sup> comprised 92% of the total workforce (NCEUS 2007: 1). It uses a consumption threshold of Rs 20 per person per day and estimates that in 2004-05, as high as about 77% of India (rural and urban, NCEUS 2007: Table 1.2 and p 1) fell below this threshold. The number of these “poor and vulnerable” has actually steadily increased: 732 million in 1993-94, 811 million in 1999-2000, and 836 million in 2004-05, although their proportion in the population has steadily declined. It is worth pointing out here that the number of poor (and not just the percentage of poor) is relevant if we want to budget for and target the poor; therefore, an increase in the number of poor has important implications.

The Planning Commission (2012: Tables 2, 3), using the Tendulkar Committee's poverty lines, documents that the urban HCR declined from 25.4% (814.1 million people) in 2004-05 to 20.9% (764.7 million people) in 2009-10, but no one takes these estimates seriously. Essentially, we will have to wait for the recommendations of the latest committee for a consensus to emerge on the extent of urban poverty and the number of urban poor.

However, the above controversies do not distract from some basic trends, correlates and mechanisms; we discuss these below. One can use the distribution of consumption expenditure for various socio-economic groups and experiment with various poverty lines to examine which of these groups has a higher prevalence of poverty. Motiram and Naraparaju (2012) do so<sup>7</sup> using data from the 61st (2004-05) and 66th (2009-10) rounds of the NSS consumption expenditure survey, and find a clear pattern for caste and occupational groups. Among caste groups in urban areas, poverty is highest among the scheduled castes (SCs), followed by the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), scheduled tribes (STs), and others. Among occupational groups, urban poverty is highest among those involved in casual labour, followed by the self-employed. Apart from caste and occupation, other interesting dimensions have also been

explored, for example, the size of the city and migrant status. Dubey et al (2001) use NSS data to show that for all occupational groups, the incidence of poverty declines with city size, that is, the larger the city or town, the lower is the incidence of poverty (a finding also supported by Hashim 2009 and Kundu and Sarangi 2007). They argue that this could be due to better economic and social infrastructure in larger cities – while the former contributes through better opportunities, the latter does so through transfers. Migration status has also been found to be negatively associated with urban poverty. Using NSS data, Kundu and Sarangi (2007) show that migrants have a lower likelihood of being poor as compared to the non-poor, although there are differences among migrants, with rural-urban migrants displaying a higher likelihood compared to urban-urban migrants.

No discussion of urban poverty and urbanisation is complete without a reference to slums. Data from slums are present in the census, NSS and NFHS. Gupta et al (2009) use NFHS data for 2005-06 to examine eight large cities.<sup>8</sup> They define the poor in relative terms, as those falling in the lowest quartile of a wealth index. Defined this way, poverty varies from 7% in Mumbai to 20% in Nagpur. They find that the percentage of slum-dwellers varies across cities and depends upon the definition of a slum – whether it is designated a slum in the 2001 Census, or by the NFHS enumerator. Using the census definition, the variation is from 56.9% in Mumbai to 17.4% in Hyderabad, whereas using the NFHS, it varies from 57.4% in Mumbai to 2.8% in Indore. As expected, the prevalence of poor is much higher in slums as compared to non-slums (except in Indore) by both the above definitions; for example, according to the census, 41.7% of slum-dwellers in Delhi are poor, whereas the corresponding figure for non-slum-dwellers is 5%. However, there is a substantial percentage of poor in non-slum areas, too, for example, 14.7% in Nagpur.

### Urban Inequality after Economic Reforms

A discussion of poverty is not complete without referring to inequality or relative deprivation, broadly speaking. In the literature on inequality, a distinction has been made between two different kinds of inequality – interpersonal (or vertical) inequality and horizontal inequality (among subgroups of the population). Motiram and Vakulabharanam (2012) present an overview of the relevant literature and changes in both vertical and horizontal inequality in nominal consumption expenditure since the 1990s, based upon the 50th (1993-94), 61st (2004-05) and 66th (2009-10) rounds of the NSS consumption expenditure survey. They show that interpersonal inequality has displayed a steadily rising trend in urban areas – the urban Gini index has increased from 34.4% in 1993-94 to 37.6% in 2004-05, and then to 39.3% in 2009-10. This is also true for most of the states – they have witnessed an increase in urban inequality (as measured by the Gini index) during the period 1993-94 to 2009-10.

When it comes to horizontal inequality, there are several subgroups that can be considered, for example, caste, class, state/region and sector – rural/urban. One way to understand

changes in horizontal inequality is to decompose the overall inequality into “between” and “within” components using an inequality measure that belongs to the single-parameter entropy family of inequality measures (for example, Theil). An increase in the share contributed by the between component can be interpreted as an increase in inequality among sub-groups. Motiram and Vakulabharanam (2012) show that at the all-India level, rural-urban inequality and inequality among states have increased since 1993-94. Vakulabharanam (2012) decomposes the Gini index using the Yitzhaki (1994) methodology (which yields an overlapping component in addition to the between and within components) to show that class-based inequality (that is, inequality among classes) has increased since the 1980s. While the Indian growth experience in the 1980s was not inequality inducing, it has become sharply inequality inducing since the 1990s.

The story of the divergence of urban elites (owners, managers and professionals) from urban workers as well as the rural population comes across clearly from the 1980s itself. In fact, the urban elite, constituting about 10-15% of the total population in the country, has monopolised almost the entire relative gains after the economic reforms. Using the NSS All-India Debt and Investment Survey, Jayadev et al (2011) show that during 1991-2002, the median *wealth* of the urban elite was much higher and grew faster compared to that of the middle classes and manual workers. All this brings out the story of an emerging urban enclave in class terms, which indicates an extremely skewed and unequal growth. On caste, using the same survey, Zacharias and Vakulabharanam (2011) show that urban SCs are at the bottom of the urban wealth ladder, with urban STs having a marginally higher median wealth, followed by the OBCs and non-Hindus. The so-called “forward caste” Hindus are almost like an urban wealth enclave too, and overlap little with the other caste groups. Starting from a low wealth base, the urban SCs have registered a higher growth rate in median wealth compared to the other groups (especially the urban STs).

While studies using the statistical approaches discussed above have been insightful in providing broad and nationally representative trends, these insights come with certain limitations. They have scarcely provided clues as to why urban poverty persists and why/how people in urban areas move in and out of poverty (more on this below). Moreover, they have been somewhat silent on the larger structural and historical forces that help us understand and locate urban poverty, inequality and exclusionary processes. Studies that have used qualitative approaches have been more illuminating in this regard, and we turn to them next.

### 3 Qualitative and Conceptual Approaches

It is hard to provide a synthesis of the qualitative and conceptual approaches because of the presence of considerable heterogeneity. Examining the myriad studies that define this literature, we can discern disciplinary differences, differences in epistemology, and in scope. Given this, what we aim to do below is select representative studies that provide insights into

the living and working conditions of the urban poor, and the processes of exclusion operating in Indian cities.

#### How Do the Urban Poor Live and Work?

From the above discussion, it is clear that the urban poor are disproportionately concentrated in casual labour and among the self-employed. Most of these are in the “informal sector”, a term coined by anthropologist Keith Hart in his 1973 study of Ghana to describe a variety of occupations taken up by people in cities in developing countries. Since its first use, this term has been deployed widely and this sector studied extensively. In a series of works based upon an intensive study of the state of Gujarat over a long period of time, Jan Breman (1996, 1999, 2010, particularly Chapter 1) provides several insights into the functioning of the informal sector in urban India. We draw upon these works below.

He argues that there is a considerable number and proportion of labourers who “circulate” between rural and urban areas, working when they are employed in the informal sector and returning to their villages otherwise. The extent of this phenomenon, which can be described as “footloose” or “nomadic” labour, is seriously underestimated in national surveys (for example, the NSS), which have provided a fixity of residence for the respondents.<sup>9</sup> These labourers are drawn from backward communities and lack land, education, or social networks. Poverty persists among them because they cannot find sustainable livelihoods in the agrarian economy, and their temporary status does not allow them to find a foothold in the urban economy. Interestingly, the process of circulation is not completely a function of demand and supply, and is sometimes a deliberate strategy on the part of employers to gain access to a pliable workforce, which also serves the purpose of disciplining the local labour. Since the conditions of this group (for example, the costs that they incur) are not adequately captured, one consequence of the above is that poverty may be underestimated using the NSS surveys.

Supplementing Breman’s work, Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan (2003) argue that the standard marginalist (used in neoclassical economics) and Marxian narratives of migration are reductionist and economic. The authors bring in larger concerns of space, culture, politics and labour mobility to argue that the logic of circulation or circular migration is governed also (and sometimes mainly) by non-economic considerations, which can arise out of counter-hegemonic politics as well. They emphasise the role of agency and the subjectivity of the migrants, who may use consumption or labour deployment as ways of countering certain oppressive cultural or political processes in their places of origin.

The informalisation and circulation of labour have to be understood in the context of a larger intellectual discourse (for example, on the part of the World Bank) supporting these processes, and viewing labour mobility in a positive light. The difficult living conditions of informal workers are a result of certain major failures on the part of the Indian state, which, unlike states in the west, did not provide adequate (cooperative) housing for the workers (Breman 2010: Chapter 1). Since

the early waves of migration induced by industrialisation (particularly in cities like Mumbai) began in the colonial period, this has to also be located in the context of the particular regime of colonialism that India witnessed, and the relationship between the colonial state and its “subjects”.<sup>10</sup>

Other features of the informal sector, which are not well-known, have also been highlighted in the works of Breman and in some other studies. The informal sector is not homogeneous, but differentiated by the presence of a hierarchy of jobs. Moreover, contrary to received wisdom, the purpose of the informal sector is not a temporary one, providing respite to migrants who could use it to move to better jobs in the formal sector. It also does not have an infinite absorptive capacity and is actually characterised by unemployment and underemployment, phenomena that are not well understood. The informal and formal sectors are actually locked together and interact with each other in complex ways (also see Guha-Khasnabis et al 2006); therefore, the dualistic framework which has hitherto been the dominant paradigm informing both policy-makers and scholars is simplistic.

The complexity and internal differentiation of the informal sector is confirmed by several field-based studies, which have focused on particular occupations and sectors. These have also provided valuable insights into the conditions under which informal workers live and work. We focus on two of these occupations – scrap/waste picking and street vending. There is extensive literature on the former, for example Furedy (1984), Chikarmane and Narayan (2000) and Chikarmane (2010). Chikarmane and Narayan (2000) document the different layers that characterise this industry – waste pickers, itinerant buyers and scrap dealers, with the waste pickers at the bottom of the hierarchy. While the waste pickers are mostly female, the itinerant buyers are mostly male. There are particular caste groups that enter this trade, and given this, a patronal but exploitative arrangement is formed between the traders and itinerant buyers/waste pickers. This industry also illustrates the fact that for the people involved in low-skilled occupations, there may be hardly any mobility and escape from poverty. Most people involved in waste picking spend their whole lives in this activity – starting as children and continuing till they become physically incapacitated.

Unlike waste picking, street vending has not received much scholarly attention (Sood 2011), despite being the ubiquitous and prominent face of the informal sector and providing livelihood to more than a crore individuals (EPW 2007). However, there are some recent scholarly studies that one can draw upon, for example Anjaria (2006); Kalhan (2007); and Bhowmik (2010). A study of street vending provides a good illustration of the relationship of the informal sector vis-à-vis the state and the urban elite/middle classes. The state tries to regulate street vending and views it as a source of revenue, while on the ground, it is predatory and rent-seeking (extracting bribes). The affluent urban elite view street vendors as a nuisance and an eyesore, obstacles in the path of Indian cities moving on to “world class” status. The less affluent middle classes take an ambivalent view, seeing vendors as a source of cheap bargains

while at the same time sharing the above attitudes. The withdrawal of the state and the wave of decentralisation in recent times have created a space for elite non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and residential welfare associations, which have been able to promote the above ideas and attitudes with some success – Bhan (2009) is another example in this regard. He shows how “slum clearance” and “slum evictions” have increased dramatically in Delhi since the turn of the (21st) century. One of the important differences between these evictions and those of the past is that the former have been carried out at the behest of courts, which have themselves ruled in favour of non-poor resident welfare and trade associations.

It is well known that many people in the urban informal sector, particularly the migrants, live in slums. In his path-breaking work, Davis (2006) provides further insights into the process of slum formation, the growth of the informal sector, and the growth of cities in general. A few findings from his study are worth pointing out. In India, in contrast to China, it is the medium-sized – and not the larger – cities that have seen enormous growth. Moreover, in larger cities (for example Mumbai) growth has proceeded concomitantly with deindustrialisation. Across the developing world (including India), an important contributor to this growth is migration from the countryside; however, the countryside is itself becoming urbanised while sending migrants to the cities. Several field-based studies have also provided further insights into slum conditions and the question of how poor households, particularly in slums, could get trapped in poverty. Banerjee (2000), based on a study from Delhi and Mumbai, argues that many slum children are not in school due to the inadequacies of the schooling system, rather than the economic backgrounds of their families. Kumar and Agarwal (2003), based on evidence from Delhi, documents the surprising finding of considerable inequality within slums, for example between men and women, and among migrants from various states.

### Urban Growth, Rising Inequality and Processes of Exclusion

Sanyal (2007) makes a few general arguments about postcolonial capitalism that are applicable to the urban development in India as well. His main argument is that postcolonial capitalism operates on a twin trajectory of creating a space of capital that functions on the one hand with the dynamics of capitalism (as thinkers like Marx have described it), and on the other, creates a “need economy” for all those not incorporated into the domain of capital. The relation between these two is not one of annihilation, but one of exclusion, primitive accumulation, and at the same time a reversal of primitive accumulation through what Sanyal refers to as “developmental governmentality”. Applied to the urban, the fast-growing urban formal sector can coexist with a large informal sector that caters to the need economy of the majority of the workforce (“the dispossessed and the outcasts”). In this process, the formal/capitalist sector could dispossess the informal continuously at the same time as it transfers some of its surpluses to renew the informal/need economy. This complex interaction precludes a larger narrative of historical transition in favour of an understanding that shows

how capital itself constantly reinforces a non-capitalist space to ensure its own continued survival. While Sanyal's description of the urban process as one that simultaneously includes a select minority and excludes the large majority is insightful, it simplifies the relations between the two into one that is only mediated through developmentalist welfarism and dispossession. In reality, the so-called excluded are on the fringes of the formal economy – subsidising it and feeding various cheap inputs to it, while being periodically dispossessed by it. Sanyal's insights, along with the logic of circular migration (described above), which shows how the informal workers participate and leave the circuits of capital using their agency (or due to structural factors), may provide a better framework to explain how the urban process is unfolding in India. Also, if we take the insights offered by the work on "waste" and its circulation in Indian cities, the solid boundary that Sanyal draws between the world of capital and the world of need/subsistence becomes far more porous. Despite this, Sanyal's arguments throw considerable light on the inequality inducing growth processes that have characterised urban development in India over the last two decades.

Other studies, too, have provided insights into the complex processes of exclusion and inclusion occurring in India today. For example, Gooptu (2011) focuses on the process of reimagining cities as entrepreneurial and dynamic, and as keys to the future growth of India. This results in a contradictory set of tendencies. On the one hand, it leads to elite and middle class revolt against the poor and to their distrust of politics (particularly electoral politics), which they see as disruptive of the developmental process and one that allows the poor to be "vote banks". On the other hand, there is also a realisation that the poor have to be "included" in the growth process, which is done in two ways – as entrepreneurs and as stakeholders. The former is accomplished through NGO, international donor and state-sponsored schemes like self-help groups, microfinance, and so forth. The latter has gone along with decentralisation (the 74th amendment, which empowers local bodies), and the poor have been incorporated through local institutions and projects, for example, Ward Committees, Slum Works Maintenance Committees. The net effect of these contradictory tendencies has been that while inequality has grown and the poor are still vulnerable, their dissent is muted, lacking overt political mobilisation.

Harriss (2006) examines a different source of exclusion in modern India by focusing on "civil society" activism, which has grown in recent times. He draws upon survey-based and ethnographic evidence from Delhi, Mumbai and Chennai to throw light on the tensions and conflicts between the middle classes and the informal working classes. The middle classes dominate civil society activism, and those belonging to the informal sector are largely excluded from it. To the extent that participation in civil society organisations contributes to political participation, this is a mechanism through which political inequality is accentuated. The one exception to this trend is struggles over women's rights, livelihoods and housing. In these movements, women belonging to informal, working-class households are also active. However, housing

and livelihood are issues over which the middle classes and working classes come into conflict. Middle-class apathy has also been used to explain why the sanitary conditions under which many of the urban poor in Indian cities live are appalling. Chaplin (1999) argues that the Indian middle classes (having monopolised the basic services provided by the state) have little incentive to support moves to improve sanitary conditions in general, since compared to the poor, they are largely protected from ill health resulting from poor sanitation. Moreover, there is inadequate pressure "from below", in contrast to mid-19th century Britain, where there was considerable organised trade union pressure.<sup>11</sup>

While we have discussed exclusionary processes occurring on the basis of class and caste, some studies have focused on religion, particularly on the status of Muslims. In a recent study combining statistical data with ethnography (Jaffrelot and Gaynor 2012),<sup>12</sup> several scholars studied the conditions of Muslims in 10 Indian cities.<sup>13</sup> Muslims (along with Parsis and Jews) are the most urbanised community in India, although more than half of them live in seven states. Their urban poverty levels are much higher than their rural poverty levels, and are also higher than the urban poverty levels of the Hindus. As pointed out by the Sachar Committee, compared to the national average, urban Muslims are substantially under-represented in the formal sector. The marginalisation of Muslims can be located in a historical context – with the advent of British colonialism, partition, and the loss of the princely states. In recent times, an important contributing factor has been the rise of Hindu nationalism and the concomitant rise in communal violence. Repeated bouts of communal violence have resulted in ghettoisation in some cities (for example, Ahmedabad), and spatial segregation. Ghettoisation has taken a particular form, wherein despite other differences (for example class and caste), Muslims have begun to stay in the same locality, insulated from the rest of the city, a locality where the state services (schools, roads, etc) are very poor. Paradoxically, given that Muslims belonging to different socio-economic strata are resident in the same locality, the poor in these ghettos are better off compared to poor Muslims living in cities (Mumbai, for instance) where the Muslim elite and middle classes do not interact with them. Muslims are better off in the south and the east, compared to their compatriots in the west and the north.

#### 4 Discussion and Conclusions

What is the composite picture of distributional changes in urban India that we get from the quantitative and qualitative approaches? First, on the question of urban poverty (along any single dimension like consumption or income), the evidence from quantitative approaches is not adequate to come to any consensus in answering even simple questions, like: How many people are poor in urban settlements in India? What has been the trend/rate of poverty? What is the pace of poverty reduction over time? To a large extent, the blame can be laid on the Planning Commission and successive committees, which have been unable and/or unwilling to adopt a set of coherent and defensible norms in fixing the poverty line. The

Indian situation is not unique in this regard; the World Bank has created considerable controversy and confusion through its international poverty lines (\$1 per day, \$2 per day, etc; see the contributions in UNDP 2004).

This is not the place to go into details, but one good way out of this mess is to adopt a capability-based approach (although it is difficult to implement) by fixing the threshold (that is, poverty line) at a level such that people above this threshold can afford some basic capabilities (for example, housing, shelter, food) – a proposal conceptually similar to the one made by Reddy (2004; also see Pogge and Reddy 2003) in the debate on international poverty lines. We suspect that if such an approach is adopted, the poverty levels in India will be much higher than what the official figures have hitherto told us (since the official poverty lines have been kept artificially low). We also expect this approach to result in rates of poverty reduction that are lower than the corresponding official rates. Also, although there are some conceptual and operational issues that need resolution, it may be worth moving beyond analyses of urban poverty along a single dimension (for instance, consumption) and strengthening the tradition of multidimensional analyses in the Indian context.<sup>14</sup>

Due to a paucity of nationally representative panel data, it has not been possible to rigorously understand how/why people move in and out of poverty, and the mechanisms through which urban poverty persists and is reproduced.<sup>15</sup> However, we have some evidence showing that access to credit, education and family characteristics<sup>16</sup> play an important role.

Second, the evidence on inequality is much clearer from quantitative approaches (although there is an understatement of the levels of inequality). Since the advent of economic reforms, the fast-paced growth in India has become intertwined with rising inequality, primarily driven by the increasing urban inequality and rising gap between urban and rural areas. Within urban spaces, there has been a rapid increase in the gap between urban elites and urban workers (formal and informal), and this rise in class inequality is the basis for the increasing urban inequality. In the past two decades, as Indian growth has become centrally constituted by the Indian urban process, the rural populations (particularly agricultural populations, who have been unevenly affected by a nationwide agrarian crisis since the late 1990s) have been left behind, giving rise to the growing urban-rural gap.

The qualitative approaches on urban poverty and inequality add valuable insights to this picture, by showing how the specifically urban dynamics that Indian growth has unleashed have affected the livelihoods of the urban poor and their inclusion in the growth process. By focusing both on the nature of working groups and their dynamics, these approaches point to the need for a correction in our understanding, sourced from the estimates of large-scale surveys. It is clear that urban poverty levels probably run much deeper and are chronic by nature, given the kind of occupational continuities and the low valuation of the labour that the working poor in cities (especially in the informal sector) are forced to perform. It is also probably true that the poor perceive their condition in myriad

ways, some of which are different from those of “experts” and policymakers.<sup>17</sup> The qualitative and conceptual work on inequality has delineated the deeper processes at stake, such as postcolonial capitalist dynamics, or the nature of the entrepreneurial and neo-liberal city, or the nature of middle class civil society activism, or exclusion and segregation based on caste or religion, which have shaped urbanisation and its iniquitous tendencies in the recent Indian experience. Studies that have combined quantitative and qualitative approaches in analysing poverty have provided richer and counter-intuitive insights. For example, Baud et al (2008) combine census data with geographic information systems techniques to map multidimensional urban poverty at the ward level for the city of Delhi. They explore the spatial concentration of poverty and the association between voting patterns and poverty levels. An interesting finding from their study is that areas of serious concerns (“hotspots”) are not concentrated in slums – this is in contrast to the findings from NFHS that we described above.

### Way Forward

In this paper, we have attempted to collate the various insights into urban poverty and inequality in India from separate quantitative and qualitative studies, and a few composite works. We strongly believe that combining these approaches in a more organic manner will produce better insights. There have been earlier attempts to bring these approaches together. An early attempt to do so produced inconclusive conversations between economists and anthropologists (Bardhan 1989).<sup>18</sup> Another consistent effort has been by the “Q-Squared” group (see, for example, the special issue of *World Development* (2007; 35, 2; and Addison et al 2009). This expression refers to the combining of quantitative and qualitative methods (hence the “squared”) in the understanding of poverty, carried out by a group of scholars from various social sciences (economics, sociology, anthropology, etc). They have achieved modest success while working through the serious tensions that conversations between these approaches generate. Some scholars associated with this group (Kanbur and Shaffer 2007) have argued that these tensions could arise at a very fundamental level, such as on the epistemological plane or at the level of normative theory in analysing poverty. Beall et al (2012) argue for a multidisciplinary approach in understanding urbanisation, on the basis that economists have tended to focus more on density (agglomeration effects) and dynamics (migration), while the other social scientists have focused more on diversity and heterogeneity in discussing politics, culture, social relations, change, and so forth.

While some progress has been made through these initiatives, the common problem facing all these efforts is that the disciplinary divide is really powerful and disabling where conversations are concerned. Future efforts will have to move from multidisciplinary efforts to interdisciplinary initiatives, a distinction emphasised by Harriss (2002), which we find insightful.<sup>19</sup> It is important to proceed with composite concepts, categories and approaches at the point of analysing the field, rather than trying to set up conversations at a later stage.

Given the strong influence of positivism in quantitative approaches, and the multiple and fragmented epistemological approaches that populate critical qualitative studies, the best that a post facto conversation can achieve is the small concessions that the two sides of this divide will make for each other.<sup>20</sup> Instead, it should be admitted at the outset that both quantitative and qualitative methodologies ought to be integrated (indeed, it is apparent that both are needed in any meaningful research) in studies on urban (or rural) poverty and inequality. Apart from the descriptions and characterisations that define this field currently, there should be an attempt to examine causal structures that blend various levels of being – the spatio-temporal nature of global capitalist dynamics, national political and economic regimes, and the local aspects of political economy and culture.

We believe that this will invariably produce a multiplicity of such conceptualisations (which also combine quantitative and qualitative methodologies) and there can then be a debate between these composite approaches, rather than going ahead with the current unproductive divide between quantitative

and qualitative approaches. Quantitative scholars will have to move out of their comfort zone of observing/analysing the world through large databases, to analysing the field through an expanded conceptual apparatus that grapples with the logic of power structures on the ground, and their role in producing different regimes and dynamics of poverty and inequality. Qualitative scholars should better attempt to integrate analyses of microcontexts with the larger structures in which they are located. Quantitative forays by these scholars towards understanding micro or macro structures (without attaching any necessary “objectivity” to numbers considered absent in other kinds of material by traditional quantitative scholars) may help reduce the intense fragmentation characterising their discussions. Movements of the above kind, coupled with a willingness to start from a set of composite research practices on the part of both may produce better conversations in the future. This might also go a long way in making sense of the mechanisms through which constructions of just and equitable urban spaces are being thwarted in India, and elsewhere.

## NOTES

- 1 Urban process in capitalism, as David Harvey (1989) describes it, broadly comprises of the processes of capitalist accumulation and class struggle that happen in urban contexts (large concentrated settlements) as capital increasingly concentrates itself in these spaces, and all that this entails in terms of production, consumption, circulation, creation of classes and their relations, conflicts, cultural processes, spatial agglomerations and their reconfigurations, built environments, over-accumulation and crises, and so forth.
- 2 Rather than academic disciplines (economics vis-à-vis other social sciences), we use “quantitative” and “qualitative” approaches as the main basis of our classification of the literature. This is because while most economists use quantitative approaches, some use qualitative approaches too. Qualitative approaches are more popular with non-economists, although some of them use quantitative approaches too. There are also a relatively few practitioners who have combined these approaches.
- 3 There is a lot of heterogeneity within the qualitative literature, so we shall attempt to make bounded generalisations from our reading and interpretation of this literature.
- 4 Given this, and in the interests of space, we have not discussed multidimensional poverty. For a description of this methodology and some applications to India, see Alkire and Foster (2007), Alkire and Seth (2009), Jayaraj and Subramanian (2010).
- 5 Defined as “...all unincorporated private enterprises owned by individuals or households engaged in the sale and production of goods and services operated on a proprietary or partnership basis and with less than 10 total workers” (NCEUS 2007: 2).
- 6 Defined as “...those working in the unorganised enterprises or households, excluding regular workers with social security benefits, and the workers in the formal sector without any employment/social security benefits provided by the employers” (NCEUS 2007: 3).
- 7 Also see Dubey and Gangopadhyay (1998) for an analysis using older data.
- 8 Chennai, Delhi, Hyderabad, Indore, Kolkata, Meerut, Mumbai and Nagpur.
- 9 The latest round of the employment and unemployment survey is more useful in this regard.
- 10 On the issue of housing and the difficult living conditions of migrants in the colonial period, see the insightful work of Chandravarkar (2006).
- 11 Also see Fernandes (2004) on the rise of new middle classes and the “Politics of Forgetting”, wherein marginalised groups (for example, the poor and working classes) are excluded from certain urban spaces.
- 12 Also see the summary (Jaffelot 2012) of findings in the popular Indian magazine *Outlook*.
- 13 Ahmedabad, Aligarh, Bangalore, Calicut, Cuttack, Delhi, Hyderabad, Jaipur, Lucknow and Mumbai.
- 14 Some of the dimensions that have been incorporated are: access to proper housing, water and sanitation, electricity, clean fuel, etc (see Jayaraj and Subramanian 2010 and Alkire and Seth 2009).
- 15 On the importance of thinking about poverty over time, see Christiansen and Shorrocks (2012). On the issue of people moving in and out of poverty, see Krishna et al (2004) and Krishna (2004) in the rural context. There is also only sparse literature on “Chronic” (or long-duration/extended) poverty in India; see, for example, Radhakrishna et al (2004) and Mehta et al (2011).
- 16 See, for instance, Thorat and Sadhana (2009), who use data from the Economic Census to argue that restrictions on capital result in SCs and STs being underrepresented among owners of private enterprises. Motiram and Singh (2012) use data from the India Human Development Survey and find that intergenerational occupational mobility is much lower for individuals who belong to poorer/less-skilled occupations.
- 17 On this issue, see the insightful work of Chambers (1995). Some of the neglected dimensions that he highlights are vulnerability, powerlessness and humiliation. On humiliation or “insult” and its connections with caste in the Indian context, see Rao (2009).
- 18 Also see Bardhan and Ray (2008), which is concerned with the commons.
- 19 “...the former means that different disciplines flourish side-by-side, and perhaps that perspectives from different disciplines are deliberately brought together, whereas the term ‘interdisciplinarity’ refers to more rigorous attempts to integrate the frameworks of different disciplines and to explore research questions ‘which

would not otherwise arise within the boundaries of a single discipline’ ...Interdisciplinary ‘development studies,’ as an academic field, for some of its practitioners, at least, has the high ambition of attempting to restore the holistic social science that was broken up with the emergence of different specialisms in the 19th century” (Harriss 2002: 494).

- 20 For a forceful elaboration of this issue, see Du Toit (2009), who also discusses several other methodological issues that arise in the conceptualisation and measurement of poverty.

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