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Poverty in India:  
Concepts, Research and Reality

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I N S T I T U T E O F D E V E L O P M E N T S T U D I E S

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL PROBLEMS

POVERTY IN INDIA: CONCEPTS, RESEARCH AND REALITY

by

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In India, as elsewhere, professionals and poor people see deprivation in different ways. Professionals need to count. Poverty-line thinking sees deprivation in terms of low flows of income or consumption, but it has many other dimensions. Poor people's own perceptions and priorities suggest additional criteria. A hierarchy is postulated of consumption for survival, assets for security, and independence for self-respect. Normal research commits errors which support misconceptions about poor people and their priorities. New methods promise better insights. Implications for policy and research include decentralised learning from poor people and use of their criteria for wellbeing. The relevance of the Integrated Rural Development Programme is questioned, with support instead for consumption-oriented programmes for the desperate poor, and programmes for secure ownership and rights to trees and land for them and for the less poor.

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## POVERTY IN INDIA: CONCEPTS, RESEARCH AND REALITY

### Whose Perceptions and Priorities?

In understanding poverty and how to reduce it, there are two starting points which are as obvious as they are neglected. One is the perceptions and priorities of those who define poverty - normal, non-poor, urban-based and numerate professionals. The other is the perceptions and priorities of the poor themselves. Curiously, neither has received much attention in the dominant professional literature of anti-poverty research and policy. Most professionals plunge into the debate in the middle, without questioning their mindsets or the basic framework; and the poor are not much consulted anyway. This paper sets out to examine the dominant current professional definition of poverty in India, and some of the views, expressed or inferred, of poor people themselves. This points towards a reassessment of poverty, with implications for research priorities and methods and for policy.

### The Professional Poverty Trap

In the past four decades many aspects of deprivation in India have been attacked. Measures include the abolition of Zamindari, land reform, limitation and control of indebtedness and interest rates, programmes for special areas and special groups, and the sequence of major administered national programmes which began most conspicuously with Community Development in 1952. Priorities and programmes have flowed in a succession, and those of the past have been gradually buried or absorbed as new ones have come into prominence. The 1980s have been distinguished by programmes of direct attack on poverty, especially with the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) launched at the start of the decade. While recognising the different strategies and priorities of earlier programmes, this paper concentrates on examining the way recent analysis and policy have increasingly focussed on aspects of deprivation which are defined as 'poverty'.

The term 'poverty' has itself become a problem. In practice two meanings can be separated out. The more inclusive describes the general condition of people who are badly off and encompasses many aspects of want and disadvantage. For this more inclusive meaning, I shall use the word 'deprivation' while in keeping with common practice using 'the poor' to mean people who are in various combinations of ways deprived. The second meaning is narrower and implicit in the debates about levels of poverty in India in recent years. These have concentrated on some of the aspects of deprivation which are easier to measure. They have been concerned first with the measurement of poverty and of trends in its prevalence, and second, with the effectiveness of anti-poverty programmes. In connection with these

debates, 'poverty' means the figures reported and recorded for the measures which are used. In the case of the National Sample Survey (NSS) these are the recorded and reported levels of consumption.

The first debate, on the measurement and trends of poverty, has focussed on poverty lines. These have a long history. It is almost a century since Charles Booth (1889) published his Life and Labour of the People in which he defined the 'poor' and the 'very poor' in East London in terms of income and then conducted a survey to estimate their numbers. In the latter 1930s and 1940s in India, following the Bombay Textile Labour Enquiry Committee, measurements were made in some cities of a poverty line, a destitution line, and a starvation line, all measured in income per adult unit (Thakur 1985:33). Later Dandekar and Rath's (1971) Poverty in India set a baseline for much subsequent policy and thinking. Subsequently, the pages of the Economic and Political Weekly (EPW) have been enlivened by the controversy between V M Dandekar and P V Sukhatme, much of it about nutritional requirements and their variability, assessment, and relations to measurements of income and consumption. Preoccupations in the literature have included criteria for poverty lines, their measurement, and trends.

The second debate has been over the effectiveness and impact of anti-poverty programmes. This too has not lacked liveliness, with Raj Krishna (1983) disputing the Planning Commission's claims for numbers who had moved above the poverty line (PL), Nilakantha Rath (1985) arguing that the anti-poverty Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) had been largely ineffective, and others including M L Dantwala (1985) and Indira Hirway (1985) contributing rejoinders.

The history and substance of these two debates have been reviewed elsewhere (eg Cutler 1984, Thakur 1985). They will surely continue to excite and stimulate critical comment. The concern here is not, however, with their detail but with their modes of thought, perception and analysis. These show two preoccupations: with flows; and with measurement.

First, poverty has been taken as a lack or want of flows. The flows may be of income or consumption. The PL can then be defined in many different ways. Thus Dandekar in his 1981 lecture on Measurement of Poverty mentions four criteria which may be used:

- i. proportion of expenditure taken up by essential items such as food
- ii. calorie value of food

iii. cost of a balanced diet

iv. cost of essentials of tolerable human existence

He then makes the point that whichever criterion is chosen, 'it is used to determine an expenditure level which meets that criterion; and ultimately, it is the expenditure level so determined and not the chosen criterion which defines the poverty line' (ibid:6). The scope for discussion of levels and measures for the PL has not been neglected by social scientists: per capita calorie requirements, inter and intra individual variance in calorie requirements, what should constitute a food basket, what deflators to use inter-annually, and so on, have provided ready grist to high-powered intellectual mills which have sometimes ground quite small. Less space has been given to the deeper question whether cut-off levels in income or consumption flows are in the first place a good way of assessing poverty or deprivation, or of distinguishing the poor from the less poor or the more deprived from the less deprived.

Second, much attention has been paid to measurement. Data on income might be preferred to consumption data on grounds of relevance, but are difficult to obtain with accuracy. The NSS only seeks data on consumption. Since the NSS provides the main data set for assessments of changes in poverty in India, the PL is in practice defined in terms of average per capita consumption. Trends in poverty are then assessed through analysis of the NSS survey data according to increases or decreases in numbers of households recorded as consuming more or less than the PL norm. Refinements include the Sen Index which takes account of the extent of poverty within the population below the PL (Ahluwalia 1986:60) and Subbarao's (1985) income mobility matrices which measure and indicate changes within the population below the PL. Significantly, neither of these modifications or improvements questions the paradigm: they are still based on measurements of flows.

The definition of poverty implied by the PL approach is thus narrow. In common usage, in contrast, 'poverty' includes other forms of want. The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary gives it as:

The quality or condition of being poor ... The condition of having little or no wealth or material possessions; indigence, destitution, want (in various degrees) ...

One can note that the PL is not concerned with wealth or material possessions. Nor does it deal with other aspects of deprivation relating to access to water, shelter, health services, education, or transport; nor with indebtedness, dependence, isolation, migration, vulnerability, powerlessness, physical weakness or disability, high

mortality or short life expectancy; nor with social disadvantage, status or self-respect. The PL is concerned only with income or consumption, and usually only with consumption.

That there is much more to deprivation than income or consumption levels is only commonsense and common knowledge. An alternative or antidote is Amartya Sen's concept of 'capabilities', referring to what a person can or cannot do, or can or cannot be (Sen 1984 passim), drawing attention to functioning and freedoms. Others who undertake mathematical analysis of income or consumption levels also recognise the limitations of their approach. Montek Ahluwalia, for example, in his (1986) essay on 'Rural Poverty, Agricultural Production, and Prices: A Reexamination', starts with an acknowledgement of the broad reality (using 'poverty' to mean what I am terming 'deprivation') as follows:

A complete assessment of trends in rural poverty should take account of several dimensions of poverty, of which income or consumption levels per head is only one. Equally relevant are factors such as longevity, access to health and education facilities, and perhaps also security of consumption levels from extreme shocks.  
(1986:59)

Moreover, near the end of his essay he writes:

A comprehensive assessment of the living conditions of the poor, and changes over time, must encompass not only consumption levels, but also health, longevity, security in both health and consumption levels, and, of course, access to public goods such as drinking water and education.  
(ibid:72)

But he points out that his analysis is constrained because

...time-series data on all of these dimensions are not available. Data from a series of consumption surveys conducted by the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSS) are available, and these data have been used in most of the studies of rural poverty in India.  
(ibid:59)

This forces him, like others, into forms of syntax in which 'poverty' means having low reported per capita consumption. Phrases like 'time trend in poverty', 'the percentage of the population in poverty', and 'variation in the extent of poverty' refer not to deprivation, nor even to wealth and income, but to NSS records of consumption. The data sets and methods of analysis take over. Poverty becomes what has been measured and is available for analysis.

This bias to the measurable was recognised by D S Thakur in his "A Survey of Literature on Rural Poverty in India" (1985). Near the end of his monograph he observes that:

this review of various studies on poverty in India has revealed that their major focus has been on the aspect of measurement. None of them, in fact, examined the conceptual issues underlying the definitions of poverty or explored into causal links in depth between the various factors underlying the phenomenon.

(my emphasis)

But Thakur allows himself no space to explore the implications of this remarkable finding. Instead he continues in the very next sentence 'Even in the aspect of measurement there are many issues to be resolved.' and proceeds to mention problems such as the need for fractile price indices, lack of a satisfactory method for precise estimating of basic needs other than food, difficulties with seasonal variations, and regional diversity. The paradigm of flows and measurements is not questioned. Thakur is trapped by the literature he reviews.

Even within the paradigm of flows and measurements, there is a further narrowing.

Most normal professional discourse is reductionist, and the analysis of poverty in India and elsewhere is no exception. Complex realities are simplified to manageable figures on a single scale. Sometimes this is done through composite indices with weightings for different dimensions. The Physical Quality of Life Index (PQLI), which conflates literacy rates, infant mortality and life expectancy, is one example, but little used in India. Most professional analysis of poverty uses the single, simple scale of consumption. As Dandekar has put it 'Whichever criterion we might use to define the poor, if poor and not-poor are to be mutually exclusive classes, we must use one single definition of poverty.' (1981:9)

Given the many dimensions of deprivation, this reductionism over-simplifies. When 10 or 20 dimensions could be listed, the simplification of taking just one indicator is not far short of heroic. Yet the reasons are easy to understand. Planners and politicians need measures to tell them how well (or badly) they and the economy are doing in their attempts to reduce deprivation. For that, surveys and statistics are the normal means. In most professions, quantification and mathematics are valued and high status activities (Chambers 1986). Surveys have been increasingly conducted by 'remote control' (anon:1982) with little or no contact between senior researchers and the field, let alone with respondents. This makes it all the easier to ignore complex realities and concentrate on simple numbers. In the case of the NSS, it is not even necessary for would-be analysts to

organise surveys: the figures are publicly available. They can be studied and articles can be written without the inconvenience of field collection of data. Moreover, a prestigious debate based on such figures has been joined for many years, and has generated sufficient heat for continuing spontaneous combustion as new data become available and new academics and planners enter the fray. The NSS time series data sets provide what is needed for the forms of mathematical analysis which statisticians and economists seek to undertake. This is not to say that they are wrong to apply their skills, nor that their work is without value. It is, though, to question the fit, relevance and dominance of the measures they use. For these are constrained for the convenience of analysts and in turn constrain and shape their perceptions. Deprivation and poverty come to be seen as what is measured and shown in statistics. Deprivation and poverty are then defined, not by the changing and varied wants and needs of the poor, but by the more static and standardised wants and needs of professionals. Analysts' needs for numbers narrow their perceptions. Conceptually, professionals are caught in their own poverty trap.

#### Analysing Deprivation

The nature of deprivation is a vast and strangely neglected subject. Much normal discussion, as in this paper so far, uses broad terms like 'the rural poor', which simultaneously permit simplistic measurement and allow free play for stereotypes and general prescriptions. There are, though, many ways in which outsiders can dissect and classify deprivation. An outline of some of them will serve to illustrate qualifications, complements, and alternatives to PL thinking.

One set of insights has been generated within the PL paradigm of flows and their measurement by Michael Lipton. Starting with flows of income or consumption, he has undertaken extensive analysis of secondary data, much but not all of it from India, to distinguish the ultra-poor from the poor<sup>1</sup> (Lipton 1983a, b and c, and 1984). He identifies a qualitative change at a threshold of low income or consumption. The 'poor' are 'like us' only poorer than us; but the 'ultra-poor' behave differently: 'the relationships of ultra-low-income economics may in many ways be as special, and as apparently anomalous, as those of ultra-low-temperature physics.' (Lipton 1984:51)

Presented diagrammatically, some of Lipton's findings or hypotheses are that as incomes or outlays decline:

	<u>Poor</u>	<u>Ultra-poor</u>
female participation	rises	declines
percentage spent on food	rises	remains steady (at around 80-85 per cent)
child: adult and infant: adult ratios	rise	rise more steeply
unemployment rates	rise	rise more sharply and become more seasonally unstable

The dividing line between poor and ultra poor is well below the Poverty Line.

Beyond this, deprivation and poverty are obviously, as Ahluwalia noted, much more than what is captured by measurements of consumption or income. In general, consumption and income data are assumed to be good proxies for other dimensions of deprivation. This they are or are not to varying degrees and in varying conditions. Exceptions are easy to think of. A household above the PL can suffer chronic sickness; a household below the PL can be free of debt and can be saving income instead of using it for consumption, or can be accumulating capital assets in the form of livestock or trees. Examples could be multiplied. It is useful, therefore, to balance PL-type criteria with other ways of dissecting, disaggregating, or classifying deprivation.

Commonly recognised and widely used categories deserve mention but will not be elaborated on. Ascribed deprivation is found by caste, gender and age. Discrimination by caste (see G. Shah 1987) is so widespread, so fully and frequently studied, so well known, and so much a focus of Government programmes for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other weaker sections and vulnerable groups, that it needs no elaboration. Discrimination by gender, against women, is also massively significant, and is now well documented and better understood. Discrimination by age, against children, who are exceptionally powerless, is less well recognised.

Other common categories are based on dominant livelihood strategies, as with small and marginal farmers, landless labourers (casual, attached, bonded etc), various specialisations of artisans, and women marketeers. One cross-cutting analysis of livelihood strategies is into hedgehogs and foxes. The reference is to the Greek proverb, 'The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big

thing.' Foxes are those who contrive a living from a repertoire of different petty enterprises and activities. These may include small-scale farming, migration, agricultural labouring for neighbours, hawking, exploiting common property resources, craftwork, and much else. Hedgehogs, in contrast, (and with apologies to biologists) have all their eggs in one basket. They depend entirely on one source of support, whether as bonded or attached labourers who have neither time, energy nor opportunity to do more than work for their master, or as outworkers such as weavers, or as full-time employees.

Deprivation can also be identified spatially. Its regional distribution is well known (see e.g. Subbarao 1985; Vaidyanathan 1987). In India it is striking how many physical indicators show what has been called the 'poverty square', comprising Eastern UP, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and neighbouring parts of other States (see Appendix A). More generally, 'remoter' or 'interior' areas tend to be poorer and less well provided with services. Biplab Dasgupta's (1975) A and B village types are useful here. Dasgupta analysed and found clusters of characteristics which he distinguished as A villages which were larger, more accessible, more irrigated, with less equal landholdings and more landless households, and B villages which were smaller, less accessible, less irrigated, with more equal landholdings and fewer landless households. There is other evidence (e.g. Epstein 1973; Breman 1985a; Hirway 1986) to suggest that the condition of landless labourers is different in irrigated and non-irrigated villages. A distinction can be made between 'core' deprivation (as found in A villages) and 'peripheral' deprivation (as found in B villages).

Lack of access to goods and services is a further aspect of deprivation. Goods and services here include employment, common property resources (Jodha 1986), markets for produce, fair price shops, health treatment, education, extension, water, transport, electricity, housing, sanitation, credit and banks, government employment and other anti-poverty programmes, and legal aid. Lack of access has a spatial aspect, but social and economic impediments are also important. For the peripheral poor, distance more often impedes access; for the core poor, social discrimination more often deters. Across the board reasons for lack of access include physical weakness, physical distance, lack of money to pay for travel, a need to pay bribes and/or fees, lack of time, responsibilities (e.g. for child care) which prevent movement, ignorance or fear of the service, preemption of the service by those with local power, and seasonal combinations of factors such as these.

Finally, deprivation can be disaggregated into five dimensions or conditions - poverty proper (lack of income and assets); physical weakness (undernutrition, sickness,

disability, lack of strength); isolation (ignorance, illiteracy, lack of access, peripheral location); vulnerability (to contingencies, to becoming poorer); and powerlessness. To varying degrees these are tackled by government programmes, but vulnerability and powerlessness are neglected compared with the rest (Chambers 1983, Chapter 5). As Table 1 confirms, members of elites find physical weakness, isolation and poverty more acceptable and less threatening aspects of deprivation to tackle. They also appear more measurable than vulnerability and powerlessness which are less tangible, and more social and political. So there is a convergence between elite interests in limiting interventions to physical aspects of deprivation, and professional interests in measurability. Together they conspire to concentrate planning, programmes, policy and debate on physical weakness, isolation and poverty, and to neglect vulnerability and powerlessness. Not surprisingly, normal professional and elite paradigms of deprivation are predominantly physical.

Table 1. Dimensions of Deprivation: Acceptability to Elites of Direct Interventions, and Measurability

Dimension of deprivation	Ranking of Acceptability to Elites of Direct Interventions	Measurability of Dimension
Physical Weakness	1	1
Isolation	2	2=
Poverty	3	2=
Vulnerability	4	4
Powerlessness	5	5

Source: Averaged reports of groups of international participants in Study Course 10, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, September 1987

These ways of categorising and identifying deprivation - by separating the poor from the ultra-poor, by ascribed status, by livelihood strategy, by spatial location, by access to goods and services, and by the five dimensions - far from cover the potential range: other physical, health, demographic, social and economic categories and indicators have been and will be useful. They do, however, illustrate how constrained the PL definition is, and how much it

misses. They also all share one defect: all derive from the ideas and analysis of outsider professionals, and not of the poor themselves; and in consequence, they do not necessarily generate research or policies which reflect the perceptions or priorities of the poor.

#### Priorities of the Poor

To write about how the poor themselves view deprivation runs the risk of being yet another form of professional projection and arrogance. If the poor are to define their condition, and their priorities for alleviating it, then they should speak for themselves. So one requirement for professionals is a careful, sensitive and sustained effort to enable poor people to articulate their needs and priorities. At the same time, to wait until much more is understood in 'our' knowledge system would be at least as irresponsible as to assert dogmatically that 'we' know what 'they' want. What follows, therefore, is not presented as truths, but only as working hypotheses which can and should be refuted or confirmed.

In this search and analysis, I have found work by five authors especially useful. They are Leela Gulati (1981), N S Jodha (1985), Jan Breman (1985a), Indira Hirway (1986), and Geoff Griffith (1987 a and b). Gulati studied the lives of five poor working women in Kerala with meticulous care, and described them in revealing detail. Jodha, in villages in Rajasthan, used anecdotal material and discussions with villagers to identify variables which villagers themselves considered real indicators of change in their economic status. Breman, in South Gujarat, spent much time with very poor people, including rural migrants. Hirway conducted field research in Gujarat involving a survey and long discussions with participants and non-participants in Government anti-poverty programmes. Griffith recorded case studies of the lives, incomes and assets of five women in a Gujarat village.

What follows here is not limited to these sources, but does, often without direct acknowledgement, draw on them.

One basic problem is the choice and use of words and categories. Jodha's paper is explicit on this point. He presents a full list of categories elicited from poor people themselves. He 'picked up the categories or concepts which farmers/villagers themselves use for assessing changes in their own economic status.' These, he notes, tend to capture the reality as it exists and operates rather than its formally quantifiable proxies.<sup>2</sup> He observes that 'the criteria in terms of which villagers perceived the change in their own economic status are rather unconventional'. He elaborates and classifies them under five groups, which can be paraphrased and summarised as follows:

- reduced dependence, expressed as reduced indispensability of support/mercy and resources of traditional patrons, land-lords and resourceful people for the sustenance, employment and income of the poor
- less reliance on low pay-off jobs/options improved liquidity and mobility
- shifts in consumption pattern
- consumer durables

(Jodha 1985: 6-8).

In making these five groupings, Jodha is introducing his own organisation for the sake of presentation and clarity. He then translates this for economists:

The indicators of change perceived by the villagers can be grouped under categories which are more familiar to economists and used in their professional communication. They are:

- (a) Indicators of enlarging opportunity sets or increasing number of choices (e.g. in the matter of employment, borrowing, marketing etc);
- (b) Indicators of consumption activities with high income elasticities (e.g. travel, slack season purchases, length of maternity, feeding of women etc.);
- (c) Indicators of investment in lumpy consumer durables (eg pucca structures of houses, compounds to houses, etc.).

The danger here is, as Jodha points out, that 'our' categories, concepts and needs dominate. First, as so often stated, 'our' knowledge is linked with power and status, whereas the knowledge of poor people is weak, dispersed and despised and so not taken into account. Second, the need to translate the concepts and categories of poor people into forms easily understood and used by economists filters out aspects which are important to the poor. This applies especially to those dimensions which are more social and less physical and so less visible and less measurable. Measured indicators which are proxies all too easily assume the primacy, in the minds of analysts, of the conditions proxied. Third, professionals generalise, excluding variance of detail. One can expect the categories and priorities of poor people to vary - by person, gender, age, ethnic group, occupation, experience, degree of deprivation, local conditions, season, and over time. But for policy and

programme purposes, this variety is simplified. In particular, the PL criterion is static. It records changes, but does not itself change.

The reversals required to achieve a balance are difficult. There is no escape from using 'our' categories to some extent. The best antidote is a continuous self-doubt and questioning, and a constant open-ended enquiry to enable poor people to teach 'us'. In this spirit, what follows is tentative, an exploration.

Perhaps all would agree at a high level of generality on wellbeing as an overarching goal. Using 'our' categories, this could be subdivided into different types of wellbeing: physical, economic, social, psychological, and spiritual. Among these, as we have seen, the normal professional tendency is to concentrate on the physical and economic aspects, which are also measurable. This neglects those which are social, psychological and spiritual. As Arjun Appadurai has pointed out (1985:6), when measures of standards of living are studied in the aggregate, they lose:

the critical qualitative dimension which must belong to any robust conception of the standard of living. Components of this qualitative dimension include: the perception of security in livelihood, the sense of freedom from harassment and abuse at home and at work, the feeling of dignity in day-to-day transactions, the belief in the reliability of officialdom, the expectation (or lack of it) that life will improve for one's offspring and so forth.

In what follows, I shall try to give due weight to these and other qualitative social and psychological aspects.

Starting with the physical and economic there may be widespread agreement among poor people in giving priority to health (freedom from sickness and disability; adequate food; long life) and to livelihood (adequate stocks and flows of food and income for a secure and decent subsistence and basic consumption). However, evidence from poor people suggests that their priorities include much more than these, especially on the social side. To try to capture this, the discussion is organised under three headings, of decreasing conventional acceptance in "our" professional discourse. Poor people's priorities appear to include: incomes and consumption meaning higher and more reliable incomes and better consumption at lower personal and social costs; net assets meaning more wealth (assets and stocks etc) and fewer liabilities (mortgaged assets, debts etc); and security, independence and self-respect meaning better security against intimidation, exploitation and impoverishment, and independent ability to handle contingencies without undue hassle, subservience or dependent debt.

Let us consider these in turn:

(i) incomes and consumption

Lack of incomes and consumption is the normal focus of professional attention, including wage rates, numbers of days worked, seasonal slack periods, and subsistence and cash flows. The importance of incomes and consumption is agreed by professionals and poor people alike, especially the very poor who are said to live 'from-hand-to-mouth'. It is reflected powerfully in the intent and design of government anti-poverty programmes like the National Rural Employment Programme (NREP), the Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme (RLEGP), the IRDP itself with its aims of raising beneficiary households above the PL, and the programme of ration books, fair price shops, and controlled low prices for basic consumption goods. The importance of incomes and consumption is not undervalued by treating it in one summary paragraph here, although I suspect its relative importance has been exaggerated, except for those who are desperately poor.

(ii) net assets and security

The desire of poor people to command and own assets is a commonplace, whether these are land, a hut or house, equipment and tools, livestock, consumer durables, or others. The desire to be free of debt is also strong. Poor people have a horror of debt. When Jaya Arunachalam devoted six months in the late 1970s to finding out what poor women in Madras wanted, small-scale credit and the opportunity to struggle out of debt came first. Debt, as is so well known, is often linked with powerlessness, subservience and exploitation. Government programmes (for land reforms, legislation abolishing debt, cheap credit, home plots and housing, and so on) have set out to tackle this. But it is noteworthy that in PL thinking the net asset position of a household is not considered. Indeed, accepting an asset on loan in the IRDP (especially if the subsidy element has been swallowed in 'commissions' to various intermediaries) may worsen, not improve, the net asset position of a household, even if it augments income.

Nor are assets on the one hand, and income or consumption on the other, linked in any simple linear manner. A recent survey reported by Bhagavan and Giriappa (1987:A-62) illustrates this for households in two villages in Karnataka, where landless labourer households on average had higher incomes per household than marginal peasants, but where their total assets were worth less than one seventh (Table 2).

Table 2: Assets and incomes of poor households in two villages

	Number of households	Av landholding per household ha	Av total assets Rs	Av annual cash income Rs
Marginal peasants	20	0.85	32,850	2,430
Landless labourers	10	-	4,350	2,750
Bonded (jita) servants	5	-	3,750	1,400

Source: Bhagavan and Giriappa 1987.

Marginal peasant households were much better off in assets than landless labourers, though their incomes were lower. In the normal professional view of PL thinking, however, and assuming equal average household sizes, the landless labourer households would be considered better off than the marginal peasants.

Vulnerability and security are neglected aspects of deprivation. People with fewer assets are more vulnerable to contingencies and harder hit by them than those with more. Contingencies here include physical incapacity (sickness, the child-bearing sequence, accidents and disablement); disasters (floods, storms, fires, loss by theft, crop or animal diseases, drought, death of an able-bodied household member...); social needs (dowry, bridewealth, weddings, funerals ...); unproductive expenditure (on petty business, a bribe, an offering, a legal fee ...); seasonal adversity and lack of food; and exploitation (threats, blackmail, violence, imprisonment, fines ...). Any book about the lives of poor people shows how much contingencies matter to them. Leela Gulati's example from the lives of poor women include collapse of a hut (1981: 29), sickness (*ibid*:10-11), physical accidents (*ibid*:48, 116), and the death of a goat (*ibid*:56-7). Such contingencies often have irreversible ratchet effects: they force downward shifts in net assets often with mortgage, debt, and decline in the productivity of labour. There is also a seasonal dimension, with a tendency for indebtedness, high food prices, sickness and the need to work to overlap in the rains, precisely when professionals are least to be found in rural areas and least likely to notice (Chambers 1982).

Contingencies are met in various ways, including sale of assets; mortgaging of assets; 'mortgaging' future labour; loans from moneylenders; loans from neighbours and/or

relatives; 'accommodation' (acceptance and doing nothing); stinting; migration; family splitting; begging help; and theft.

In two respects, vulnerability to contingencies appears to have increased.

First, traditional sources of security have weakened. Under pressure from capitalist development, State legislation for minimum wages and against bonded labour, and other forces, mutual obligations of patrons and clients have declined or ceased. As Dreze and Mukherjee (1987:16, 22) have noted for a village in Western Uttar Pradesh, also drawing on a wider review of other studies: 'Traditional patron-client relationships have disappeared, and as in most other parts of India a clear trend exists towards the 'casualisation' of labour transactions' and 'a plethora of studies have described the erosion of traditional labour relations and, in particular, the increasing dominance of casual labour among different types of labour contracts.'

The old form of security, in which the landlord or employer accepted responsibility to help in crisis and to provide consumption loans, has weakened or disappeared without being replaced by an employer-employee relationship which guarantees a livelihood to the worker. Breman (1985a:304-5) observes that one consequence of a law for the remission of debts has been to deprive labourers of the credit they need in order to survive. There has been a decline in indebtedness, but also a loss of access to credit. The poor have been losing the option of being dependent hedgehogs as bonded labourers or traditional servants. Forced to become independent foxes, one consequence is a heightened need for security from other sources.

Second, coping with contingencies now costs more. For example, the penetration of allopathic medicine and medical practitioners into rural areas has made available more expensive treatment. Poor people with sick relatives are then sorely tempted to take debts or other obligations in order to gain access to treatment, and medical practitioners are not always slow to exploit their desperation. Or again, dowry has risen in price and spread in incidence down the social hierarchy. The scale and implications of such changes for poor people do not appear to have been systematically explored.

Vulnerability is, then, likely to be more important to poor people now than in the past. In consequence, they are likely to set a higher value on the ownership of assets which can be cashed to meet contingencies. Indeed, poor people look on assets differently from officials and other professionals. Hirway (1986:140) found that non-participants in the IRDP:

feel that a cheap asset (subsidized asset) is a good acquisition as it had a good resale value. The asset therefore can be used to meet any type of emergency like social functions (marriage, death, birth etc), illness in the family, or consumption needs. One agricultural labourer went to the extent of saying that he wanted a buffalo as he was planning to get his daughter married. In other words, some of the non-participants want the schemes not for income generation but to acquire a cheap subsidized asset which also has a good resale value.

The IRDP programme seeks to provide income to get households above the poverty line. In addition to income, though, many households may attach increasing importance to finding a substitute for their earlier relations with their patrons, that is, for realisable assets to replace the dependence associated with debts.

iii. independence and self-respect

Vulnerability and security are linked with independence and self-respect. The hedgehog security of the bonded labourer is less and less acceptable to the poor. There are, here, dangers of cultural imperialism, projecting one's own values, imputing to and imagining for people values which they may not hold, and using words and concepts they do not use and which do not capture their subjective realities. All the same, independence and self-respect, including freedom from humiliating subservience, seem to matter to them, if anything, more and more. Hirway emphasises the distaste her informants felt for debts, not just because of high interest rates, or forced labour from family members, but also because what followed from them include 'abuses and insults', 'helplessness, insults and pain', and 'touching the feet of the lenders and swallowing insults and abuses' (1985: 147, 142, 144). They said 'We always have to touch the feet of the rich to get a loan' (ibid: 155). Perhaps too this is some of the significance of the first 'unconventional' category listed by Jodha, in reporting the ways villagers perceived change in their own economic status - 'reduced indispensibility of support/mercy and resources of traditional patrons, landlords and resourceful people ...'.

There would seem to have been major social change in this dimension of independence and self-respect. A typical observation is that of Gilbert Etienne (1985b:98) on a revisit to long-term informants, whom he found had lost their 'cowed demeanour' and were more decisive.

It is striking, though not surprising, that security, independence and self-respect have been largely overlooked in the numerical poverty debate in the EPW. In contrast, when sociologists and social anthropologists describe the

changes in employer-employee relationships, they reveal nuances which defy counting. Breman, for example, in his most recent book, writes:

What strikes me is the inability of farmers and landless alike to give a modern-contractual content to their relationship. Economic need forces farm servants to maximise their material security by seeking protection in a service link from which they expect not only a daily wage but all kinds of allowances, and advance loans - in short, a guaranteed subsistence. At the same time they try to limit their responsibilities to the sphere of work, in order to avoid all personal subordination and the stigma of inferiority associated with it. Conversely the farmers have a need for continuous labour, without having succeeded in finding an acceptable contractual basis for this. They prove themselves to be hard and demanding masters, who are unwilling to offer their dependents even the minimal security necessary for an existence permitting some human dignity. For the farmers, labourers are a commodity to be bought at the lowest possible price and towards whom they have no responsibility.

(1985a:309)

The heightened priority to the landless of security and self-respect which this passage indicates is not part of conventional PL thinking, confined as it is to levels of income and consumption. Security and self-respect do not show up in normal statistical surveys (though Jodha (1985) shows how proxies for them might). For the time being, the operational concepts and data of planners and economists exclude these dimensions, so important to the poor. When Jodha translated 'reduced indispensibility of support/mercy' for the sake of economists, he had to describe it as 'enlarging opportunity sets or increasing number of choices' (Jodha 1985:6,8). The implications of powerlessness, subservience and humiliation were lost; they are not economists' categories. Normal professionalism is part of the problem. Numerate thinking and conventional categories conspire to conceal from most professionals the new higher priority to the poor of security and self-respect and, as means towards them, of owning assets and being free of debt.

A three-level hypothesis: survival, security and self respect

Given the lack of theory about poor people's priorities, and the consistency of the evidence examined, a set of working hypotheses seems justified. I am trapped here in my own language, concepts and projections. Those who struggle for understanding by being closer to poor people and their reality should be able to do better. In this struggle it will be important to remember that poor people's perceived

needs and priorities have changed and will go on changing as conditions change. Continuous and sensitive monitoring are therefore indicated to keep policy, practice and research itself informed and up-to-date. The differences between different types of poor people, between regions, and between seasons will also always present problems and need to be differentiated. The model or working hypotheses suggest that priorities and strategies vary by degree of deprivation. A hierarchy of priorities is postulated to the extent that the earlier ones become satisfied, so the next become relatively more significant. A simple three-level summary, as follows, provides a starting point for dissent, empirical testing, and correction:

<u>Level</u>	<u>Descriptor for Dominant Bad Condition</u>	<u>People's Priority</u>	<u>Strategies</u>
I	Desperation	Survival = means for daily consumption	Casual labour, use of common property resources, micro-cultivation, seasonal migration, family splitting, borrowing, hedgehog strategies with patrons, begging, stinting, theft, etc.
II	Vulnerability	Security = means to meet lumpy contingent needs	Acquiring and developing assets, mortgaging assets, taking debts
III	Dependence	Self-respect = means to meet consumption and contingent needs without humiliation	Detaching from client relationships. Discharging debts, saving. Owning and building up assets. Organising collectively, etc.

Whether these or other hypotheses hold up, where and in what conditions, and for whom, are questions for empirical enquiry. If the priorities of the poor are to be put first, then those who are not poor have to understand them. For this, they have to use tools and methods of investigation and analysis which capture and represent the reality, and improve on these gross guesses. To those who find the argument and model unsatisfactory, the challenge is to correct it or propose better alternatives.

### Research and Reality

Views of reality are conditioned by modes of investigation. To get closer to reality requires critical introspection and analysis of methods. Training as a historian, experience with a questionnaire survey in South India, and analysis of misleading data on canal irrigation, have induced in me a certain scepticism about most statistics concerning rural India and about analyses of those statistics. The questionnaire culture among researchers distorts views of what is happening. At the same time there is a dearth of corrective micro-level investigation in a social anthropological and participant observation mode; and what there is suffers the familiar difficulty of generalising from the particular. Many problems of reality and research methods were raised and debated at the 'Macro-Micro Workshop'<sup>3</sup> held at Bangalore in August 1985 (see references to Appadurai, Bhattacharya et al, Breman, Etienne, Guhan, Harriss, Jodha, Maitra, Rao, Sivakumar, Srinivas, Srinivasan, Tendulkar, Vaidyanathan, and Wadley). What follows draws partly on those papers and their perceptive self-criticism which shows how elusive the reality can be.

Before considering methods, a prior question is what we need to know. Of many possible answers, three stand out: first, the needs and priorities of poor people as they perceive them; second, realities of deprivation - conditions, linkages, changes and trends; and third, performance and effects of interventions. For each of these, and its subsets, a commonsense procedure is to examine the range of methods of investigation available, or which might be invented, and then choose those which fit best. In practice, this is often not done. The methods are usually reflexes and are neither questioned nor closely tailored to fit the purpose.

#### normal research pathology

Some pathological aspects of research are so common as to be normal. Two approaches to research and investigation of deprivation are dominant: micro social anthropological participant observation; and the macro questionnaire survey. In examining their defects, caricature is tempting. Pathology is not universal, but some forms of distortion and error are common. Four can be noted here:

micro myopia: The specificity of micro studies in the social anthropological mode presents well-known and well debated problems of generalisation. Neighbouring villages can differ dramatically, and can generate quite different impressions of social structures and trends. Not all micro research is myopic, but by definition it has to peer closely at the particular. It can get lost in detail, and lose touch with wider relevance. On the rare occasions (e.g. Harriss 1987) when micro data are analysed comparatively,

the insights, including explicitly recognised uncertainties, can contribute substantially to understanding and to further research agendas.

macro mania: In number, resources and influence, large-scale questionnaire surveys are more significant than micro studies. Questionnaire surveys are such an automatic reflex for so many, that they can be seen as the only way to conduct rural research. They have many uses, but their defects are many (see e.g. Chambers 1983:49-50) and are usually overlooked. 'Data' which they generate are mistaken for reality; and what cannot be, or has not been, measured is at best out of focus, and at worst ignored or denied.

uncritical complacency: Here I must plead mea culpa. There are confessions about research methods and errors which I should have made and have not. And there are others I have made and which have been edited out. There are various reasons for these misdemeanours. One is fear of losing credibility (although confessions usually add to it). Another is reluctance to discredit other members of a research team. Yet another is the editorial pen when books or chapters or papers are too long. When publishers complain about the length of a book the methodological chapter is the most vulnerable, as it was in Green Revolution (Farmer 1977). The same can occur in articles in journals. The Economic and Political Weekly (EPW) does occasionally publish critiques of methodology and of the accuracy of surveys, for example Vaidyanathan's (1986) of the NSS, but it is rare for an article to start or end with a critique of the validity of the data on which it is itself based. One issue of the EPW (September 19, 1987) contains a small note that a major review published in two earlier issues (by Rakesh Basant (1987) on 'Agricultural Technology and Employment in India: a Survey of Recent Research') 'contained two appendices on 'Limitations of Data' and 'Methodological Issues' which could not be published due to lack of space.' Although these are available from the author, one wonders how many readers of the earlier article will see the small subsequent note, and of them, how many will write for or read the appendices.

The lack or elimination of critical analysis of the validity of data is methodologically conservative in its effects. It allows the almost rote learning of statistical and survey methodology to continue unchallenged. The correct performance of the method then appears enough, with the emphasis on sampling and statistics and a neglect of non-sampling errors, especially those which originate in the face-to-face and hand-to-pencil situation of the interviews. This sustains a tradition of reporting 'findings' without discussing the limited scope and accuracy of the data. There is more self-criticism in micro studies, which is one reason why they are more credible.

treating past as present: Delays in processing and writing up research are notorious. Social anthropologists and survey analysts alike often take long to present final usable communications. There can be a timelessness about the gently rolling, and often interrupted process of analysis and writing, and sometimes it grinds to a halt. All too frequently, statistical series, and the debate they generate, refer to times long past: and worse, they are often treated as though they are near-contemporary. Thakur (1985:45) refers to Ahluwalia's 1978 study 'Rural Poverty and Agricultural Performance in India' as 'recent', although it was published 7 years earlier, and itself referred to trends during 1956-57 to 1973-74, that is, covering a period from 11 to 29 years before Thakur's paper was published. Part of the argument in John Harriss (1985) is about poverty trends analysed in C T Kurien's (1980) book which uses data for the period 1950 to 1975. As Harriss points out, different impressions can derive from real differences in trends at different periods. So lags in analysis, publication, reading, assimilation and reproduction of information and interpretations do matter. The target is moving. The negative interpretations of growth and rural social change which are fashionable in 1987 still owe much to the poor performance of the 1960s and the early 1970s. Professional beliefs once formed are stable: they tend to set in student days and then persist into middle age. Where the reality changes fast, this misleads.

#### Missing and Misperceiving the Poor

Research can easily miss or misperceive the poor in many ways, of which four stand out:

missing the most miserable: Many of the most miserable people are physically and socially peripheral, including the landless, the low castes, women (especially widows), and migrants. There are many biases against outsiders meeting them (Chambers 1983: 10-25). Many are physically at the fringe - on the edge of villages (Moore 1981), or between villages. A specially neglected category are rural migrants (but see Gandhi and Shah 1978; Bhatt nd; Singh and Iyer 1985; Breman 1985a). They are easily missed out in surveys and even censuses. There is indeed counter-research which seeks out precisely those who are most deprived, but it is the exception, not the rule.

biasing responses: Deprivation-related responses can be biased downwards or upwards. Income may be understated or overstated. Deferential replies can overstate it. This can apply where there are dependent and exploitative relationships. Jan Breman (1985a:300) discussing minimum wage legislation in Gujarat states that farmers get labourers to thumbprint that they have received Rs 5.50 when they have only received Rs 3.

The labourers are naturally well aware of the fraud perpetrated by their bosses, but refuse to do anything about it for fear that they should be regarded as no longer willing to work. Lack of sufficient work is an excellent means of intimidating labourers. Several farmers boasted to me that their subordinates would claim to receive the prescribed amount, if any outsider cared to check this. A few went so far as to use my presence as a stranger to put the matter to the proof, thus providing the humiliating spectacle of a farm servant or maid servant giving the 'right' answers in a well trained manner.

One may speculate whether, and if so to what extent, similar upward biases occur in survey questionnaire evaluations of the IRDP.

neglecting non-agricultural activities: Large-scale surveys differ from in-depth micro-studies in their estimate of the incidence and importance of rural non-agricultural incomes. Thus John Harriss (1985:5), reporting on surveys carried out in North Arcot District, Tamil Nadu, has written:

Where surveys are concerned (primarily) with investigation of agriculture ... then it may well be that survey investigators tend to think primarily in terms of the distinction between 'cultivator' and 'non-cultivator' and to equate 'non-cultivator' with 'agricultural labour'. It is, anyway, difficult to classify households, or even individuals, according to 'primary source of income', when, as is often the case, individuals and households have a range of income sources, without quite detailed investigation. This is what I attempted in my household studies. I doubt very much whether investigators, concerned at the beginning of a survey - which is when the data referred to are commonly collected - to complete basic household listing as quickly as possible, can possibly undertake investigation at the level of detail required so as to categorise individuals or households at all accurately. I believe that there are grounds for questioning the validity of much survey research on so fundamental a question as that of the distribution of households according to primary source of income, or primary occupations.

For four villages in North Arcot, Harriss compared data from a questionnaire survey in 1983-4 with his own investigations in a social anthropological mode. Whereas the survey found only 14 per cent of households whose primary source of income was neither family farm nor agricultural labour, he found 34 per cent. On similar lines, Breman found in his survey of a village in South Gujarat that of 131 households, 126 had one or more members employed outside the village. On methodology he observes that:

In fact, the concise questionnaire necessary to guarantee a reasonably reliable survey cannot do justice to the complexity of the actual employment pattern. For example, by pressing respondents to state only the principle source of external earnings over the preceding year, the individual variation in, or even combination of occupations is concealed.

(Bremar 1985a:201)

It seems reasonable to conclude that formal questionnaire surveys systematically understate the extent to which households have multiple activity 'fox' strategies and a wide repertoire and varied sources of income, and overstate the reliance of poor families on agriculture.

overlooking poor people's own criteria: Finally, investigations, especially questionnaire surveys, almost always start from outsiders' assumptions about the poor, using outsiders' assumptions and indicators. It is rare for poor people themselves to be consulted about their own criteria for well-being. The exception already noted, of N. S. Jodha's (1985) study in Rajasthan, is highly suggestive. He elicited the categories and concepts which farmers and villagers themselves used for assessing changes in their economic status. Jodha compared his own surveys of farmers in two villages in Rajasthan in 1964-66 and 1982-84. Comparing average per capita annual net income at constant prices he found a slight increase, from Rs 162 to Rs 175. He then separated out those 35 households in the sample of 95 whose per capita constant price income had dropped by more than 5 per cent over the period, and who were in PL-thinking terms, to be considered worse off. He then compared their position in the two periods according to 38 criteria which originated from the respondents themselves. On average, 37 of the 38 indicated improvement. The only negative result was households using milk or milk products regularly, down from 34 per cent to 6 per cent.

To find a group of households whose per caput real incomes have fallen but who are on average better off by 37 out of 38 of their own criteria is so startling as to invite rejection. Methodological questions are raised and the reader is referred to Jodha's paper for his treatment of these. Some of the criteria are directly related to consumption and improved asset position, particularly better housing, and these are linked with income. Neither Jodha, nor this paper, is arguing that incomes and consumption are anything but important to poor people. The major point which cannot be evaded is that people's own criteria of wellbeing can differ from those of strict PL-thinking. There are many aspects of the quality of life which PL-thinking and measurement cannot capture. Most striking, in Jodha's study, are those concerned with declining

indispensability of patrons' support, mercy or patronage. This accounts for six of the indicators which people gave, as presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Indicators of declining indispensability of patron's (rich people's) support/mercy/patronage for employment, income and sustenance

Indicators	% of households during	
	1963-66	1982-84
Households with one/more members working as attached/semi-attached labour	37	7
Households residing on patron's land/yard	31	0
Households resorting to off-season borrowing of foodgrain from patrons	77	26
Households taking seed loan from patrons	34	9
Households marketing farm produce only through patrons	86	23
Households taking loan from others besides patrons	13	47

Details relate to 35 households whose per capita annual income (at constant prices) had declined during 1982-84 compared to 1963-66, in two villages in Rajasthan.

Source: Jodha 1985:12.

Not just incomes, consumption and assets were valued, but also freedom from dependence and humiliation.

#### Methods to Fit Purposes and Conditions

The ease of missing or misperceiving the poor and their priorities presents a methodological challenge, to devise and use new methods which better fit purposes and conditions. To learn the priorities of the poor, to understand linkages and change, and to evaluate performance and effects of interventions, requires a mix of methods and inventiveness in their use. Approaches include the use of different methods to check and calibrate each other (e.g.

micro studies in conjunction with macro studies); deliberate offsetting of known biases; application of cost-effectiveness criteria to methods and investigations, including timeliness of results and their actual use; and self-critical evaluation of methods and data together with encouraging and rewarding the admission and analysis of error. Most important, though, may be the further development and use of new methods in addition to, or instead of, participant-observation in the social anthropological mode and extensive questionnaire surveys in the statistical sociological mode.

Five such methods can illustrate the potential to fit purposes and conditions:

- micro-household longitudinal panel studies which entail association with a small number of households with intermittent intensive periods of contact and research over a period of years.
- semi-structured interviews which use a checklist of subtopics, but are quite different from questionnaire survey interviews. Semi-structured interviewing is an art (Rhoades 1982) with its own rules and skills (Grandstaff and Grandstaff 1985b).
- group interviews. Group interviews are increasingly used as a cost-effective and accurate source of many types of information (Kumar 1987; Norman 1987; Grandstaff et al forthcoming). One variant is focus groups (Schearer 1981; Folch-Lyon and Trost 1981). These are groups of usually 6 to 12 people from target populations whose opinions and ideas are sought on a topic. With some guidance from a moderator, participants have an open discussion with each other. Sensitive subjects can quite often be examined. The method is used in private business in the USA, and has also been used in family planning in India, Indonesia and Thailand, and for investigating the underutilisation of public health facilities in Ghana (Attah 1985). It would seem to lend itself well to the exploration by poor people of their problems and priorities.
- key indicator surveys. Key indicators of well-being or deprivation are elicited through focus groups and/or semi-structured interviews and/or informal groups discussions and/or key informants, and then assessed in quick lean surveys with few questions to establish prevalence and/or trends.
- intermediate-level research, identified as a priority by participants in the Macro-Micro Workshop, explores the gaps and links between the micro and the village on the one hand, and larger social, economic and political

units on the other. These are 'spaces' which tend to be overlooked by village studies and by questionnaire surveys, but which include subjects like rural to rural migration.

These methods may best fit different purposes in the manner shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Methods to Fit Purposes

	micro-household longitudinal panel studies	semi-structured interviews	groups	key indicator surveys	intermediate level research
needs and priorities perceived by the poor			X	X	
realities of deprivation: conditions, linkages, changes and trends	X	X	X	X	X

performance and effects of interventions

X X X

Note: The entries indicate better fit, and the empty boxes worse fit.

Much of the rationale for approaches such as these has been developed under the rubric of Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA). These techniques have now been refined and used in many parts of the world, and in many disciplines and professions. The University of Khon Kaen in Thailand is a leader in this field (Grandstaff et al forthcoming). Methods and experience have also been recorded elsewhere for agriculture (Agricultural Administration 1981; Beebe 1985; Galt 1985), health (Pacey 1981), social and economic dimensions (Longhurst 1981), and agro-ecosystems analysis (Conway 1985), and there is now a wide-ranging and substantial literature (see Grandstaff et al forthcoming).

The rationale for RRA (Belshaw 1981; Chambers 1981, 1985; Carruthers and Chambers 1981; Gibbs 1985; Grandstaff and Grandstaff 1985a; Jamieson 1985) includes a search for cost-effectiveness in trade-offs between the cost of investigation and learning, and the relevance, timeliness, accuracy, and actual beneficial use of information and understanding. There was at first some sense that methods of RRA, though necessary, were somehow only a second best. In two respects, this has been found to be misleading. In the first place, where information has been crosschecked (eg Collinson 1981; Franzel and Crawford 1987; Grandin 1987), RRA sources have been found to be not only cheaper and quicker than conventional sources, but also at least as useably accurate and relevant. Second, RRA sources can elicit a quality of information and insight which is not accessible to questionnaire surveys and which is even systematically screened out by them.

RRA resonates with the new paradigm of development as a learning process (Korten 1980, 1984; Rondinelli 1983; Jamieson 1985). This requires iterative and early feedback and rapid adjustment to changing conditions. In good RRA, questions of locations and methods are continuously re-examined and often changed. Far from being a preset blueprint, as in large-scale questionnaire surveys, methods are flexible: adaptation and change are expected. RRA does not fit all needs: it cannot substitute for the broad and uniform coverage of, say, the NSS; but its potential is being proved and could improve the cost-effectiveness of much rural research and investigation of deprivation and poverty in India.

Some investigators invent and use its methods without calling them RRA. But all can gain by making the principles and approaches explicit. Some of these are:

iteration and flexibility: issues, methods and findings are repeatedly reviewed and approaches changed;

direct fieldwork by senior researchers: investigations are direct and personal, and not filtered through intermediaries;

triangulation: findings are crosschecked, the same information is often sought in several different ways;

taking time: the 'rapid' in Rapid Rural Appraisal gives an impression of hurry. That, however, is a feature of rural development tourism, the brief field visit by the urban-based professional. RRA explicitly avoids both the 'quick-and-dirty' rush of rural development tourism, with its biases, and the 'long-and-dirty' of the large and preset questionnaire survey. This releases time for revisits, checking, second and third relaxed discussions with the same people, talking in

the evening, overnight stops, and methods like semi-structured interviewing, focus groups, and lean surveys late in the process of investigation.

RRA techniques are no panacea for all the ills of research. But they have now been widely tested and proven. That they do not fit the paradigms of normal professionalism - of big surveys or of social anthropological immersion - is an explanation for their neglect rather than a reason for rejecting them. Used well, they can throw much timely light on changing realities in different rural contexts.

The diversity and complexity of India is a truism. Conditions, changes and trends vary widely. For any trend in one place, exceptions and opposite trends can usually be found in others. For many reasons, of which this is one, generalisations tend to be in categories which are broad and often expressed in standard mathematical terms, as with the PL. The need for such generalisation is obvious, but levels of aggregation can mean that local variance is lost, and aspects of deprivation which are not or cannot be counted tend to be neglected. By way of illustration, some questions can be posed to which local answers will differ, and where the differences are likely to be significant for programme and policy priorities:

- for different categories of poor people, what are their own criteria of improved wellbeing?
- what changes have occurred and are occurring in the relative priorities attached by different categories of poor people to higher incomes, means to meet contingencies, an independent command over resources, and self respect and other criteria they indicate?
- how and why are the real incomes of different categories of poor households rising or falling?
- what changes have occurred and are occurring in the costs of contingencies and in the means whereby different categories of poor people meet them?
- what strategies are used by the desperate poor at bad times of the year?
- is the life of different categories of poor women, as they perceive it, improving or getting worse, and how and why?
- is attached labour becoming more or less common, and more or less arduous, exploitative and disliked?

The validity of answers to questions such as these, and the further questions into which they lead, depends on how they are investigated. Even where findings are clear and sure,

there remain deeper questions about causality, interventions, and priorities. Suffice it here to suggest that for identifying and keeping up to date with trends, for probing causality, and for judging priorities, a decentralised battery of methods is better than big standardised surveys alone, and that combinations of methods with crosschecking and iterative and flexible investigation are best of all.

#### Implications for Policy and Research

The evidence and argument of this paper have policy and research implications. As past experience shows, it is easy to be wrong. All the same, having reached this point, it seems right to follow through the lines of reasoning into the practical realm of what might be done.

##### i. learning the priorities of the poor

As we have seen, poor people's priorities can differ from those presumed for them by the not-poor. Most obviously, PL-thinking, with its single-scale numerical definition of poverty according to reported levels of income or consumption, misses much and can mislead. Types and sequences of deprivation need better definition. Lipton (1983 a, b, c; 1984) may have pushed analysis of statistics about as far as it can go, with his poor and ultra-poor. The next breakthroughs may come through applying commonsense categories, through identifying relationships which statistics do not reveal or have not caught up with, and most of all through learning their priorities and their criteria of well-being from poor people themselves.

This is not to assert that poor people know everything, and the not-poor know nothing; it is not to reincarnate a 1980s version of the Noble Savage. But it is to suggest that one of the least recognised areas of ignorance on the part of the not-poor is poor people's own relative priorities. To overcome that ignorance requires a concerted and imaginative effort. That end could be served by three initiatives.

The first is a review of methods and approaches already used to elicit the values and priorities of poor people. Methods include analysis by groups including focus groups, and semi-structured and open-ended interviews. Experience with action research, participatory action research, and dialogical research is relevant here. Much experience has been gained but has not yet been written down, particularly by voluntary agency workers. The second is R and D with poor people to further develop and refine such methods. The third is collation and analysis of the priorities and attitudes revealed so far by the application of such methods, and by other secondary data. This includes bringing together the insights of investigations already

conducted, and of others in progress. These can be expected to modify those postulated in this paper, and also point to patterns of variation by region and by group.

Beyond this, there is the challenge of conscientization for professionals - officials, academics, voluntary agency workers and others. Commonsense suggests that the most effective method is direct personal contact and learning. Who undertakes research determines who is most likely to be directly influenced by it. Field methods have already been developed by voluntary agencies and training institutions. Programmes for officials and others to learn directly from poor people, can be a powerful means to reversals, conscientization, and the new professionalism which puts poor people first.

ii. decentralised criteria

A further implication is decentralisation of criteria and programmes. On the one hand, standard measures are needed for national planning. On the other, people's own ideas and indicators of wellbeing vary by locality, region, social group, gender, and so on. One way forward here is the development of local minimum livelihood standards which express local variance in the values of poor people themselves. To centralist administrators, any such suggestion is liable to be anathema. But standardised central criteria and decentralised local criteria need not be mutually exclusive. They can coexist, for their different purposes.

The rubric of livelihoods is inclusive enough to accommodate many local criteria of well-being. Using outsiders' categories, one might think of an adequate, secure and independent livelihood, as a minimum objective for all deprived people. But this would have to be defined locally by them, and their adjectives would often or always differ from 'adequate', 'secure', and 'independent'. However, universal or near-universal elements might be year-round stocks and flows of food and income to meet basic consumption; freedom from permanent or exploitative debt; assets or goodwill to meet contingencies and provide for old age; and access to basic services.

Operationally, how to establish a local minimum standard for livelihood and wellbeing could be standardised through tested methods of consultation. Criteria and their relative weights would then vary by region and by group. Some might apply widely, like net asset position (physical asset values net of debt) as useful to complement and qualify income or consumption measures. These would be more specific and local. The indicators elicited by Jodha (1985) illustrate some of the sorts of possibility. Besides those in Table 3 they included, for example, households:

- not having to skip a third meal in the day during the summer (scarcity period);
- having houses with separate provision for humans and animals;
- where women and children wear shoes regularly;
- having members who travel by paid transport more than twice a year to outside the district;
- not withdrawing their children from school during the crop season.

For identifying within a village who needs help, and of what sort, criteria and indicators such as these should not present too much difficulty. Moreover, villagers themselves can be expert and accurate in their ranking of other villagers by wealth (Grandin 1987) or other criteria. Those below locally defined standards could be identified by villagers themselves, and ranked accordingly.

Finally, local criteria put forward by poor people themselves have obvious and vital applications to broad policies, and in detail to programme choice, design, monitoring and evaluation. The reversals they imply could mean a better fit between what poor people want, and the opportunities provided for them through official actions.

### iii. programme choice and design

The IRDP arises from, and fits in with, PL thinking with its emphasis on flows and measurements. Its aim is to raise incomes. If we take as a working hypothesis the hierarchy of survival (flows), security (means to meet contingencies) and self-respect (independence), it is the first that the IRDP sets out to tackle. Now those for whom flows are the highest priority are evidently the worst off, especially the desperate poor. They are, though, those whom in practice the IRDP finds it hardest to reach and help. For those who are somewhat less badly off, whom the IRDP more often does reach, security and self-respect are relatively higher priorities. The IRDP does not, however, directly provide security of a sort which enables people to handle contingencies. To the contrary, it entails accepting the opposite of security - indebtedness - in order to raise income. It may then actually increase, not reduce, vulnerability, through dangers of failure, through inability to repay the debt, and through loss of the asset or having to dispose of it, as when landless families find they cannot afford to feed a milch buffalo between lactations. The misfit is that those who most need income are least able or likely to participate in the IRDP, while those better able and more likely to participate have less urgent need of income, and care relatively more about security.

Two policy hypotheses follow from this. The first is that programmes which provide flows of food and income - the National Rural Employment Programme, and the Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme, and their predecessor the Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Scheme - fit the priorities of the desperate poor and should continue to be available to them. The same is true of the major programmes which subsidise consumption by the poor such as the fair price shops and ration books, the Tamil Nadu midday meals programme, and the Andhra Pradesh programme to make rice available at 2 rupees a kilogram.

The second policy hypothesis is that the less poor would welcome policies and programmes to reduce their vulnerability. As an alternative or complement to IRDP, this could take the form of programmes for secure rights and appreciating assets. These would seek to allow and enable poor people to meet their priorities or security and self-respect. It would involve the ownership of assets which appreciated and were saleable, preferably in small units to meet contingencies closely. Precisely contrary to the IRDP's regulations which do not permit sale of an asset, the disposal of appreciating assets would be at the full and free discretion of the owner. Trees (Table 5 and T. Shah 1987) fit these requirements well.

Two objections can be raised but both appear invalid. The first is that poor people, if allowed to sell assets, will do so quickly. This is likely to depend on how poor they are. The desperate poor may not be able to hang onto assets, but there is considerable evidence of the tenacity of the merely poor in their retention of assets once their basic survival is assured. They are found taking a longer view than either normal economists with their discounting or normal businessmen with their criteria of commercial profitability. But this tenacity, and the stinting it can entail, depend crucially on the poor being fully secure in their rights of ownership, in their rights to sell, and in their ability to hand on their assets to their children. It has been found in several parts of the world that small farmers who can cut and sell their trees when they want, without interference or hassle, far from cutting them quickly, hang onto them as savings and insurance.<sup>4</sup> In parts of India, small farmers are so little trusted that this behaviour has hardly been put to the test, and restrictions on cutting, and on transit for timber and wood, deter farmers from planting, protecting and retaining trees.

The second objection is that poor people who do sell assets will use the money irresponsibly. Evidence to the contrary comes from Tushaar Shah's investigation of the use of cash by very poor people in West Bengal after they had sold eucalyptus trees grown under the Group Farm Forestry Programme. The Tribals spent almost all their cash on

buying irrigated land, thus carrying out a self-help land reform. Overall, those who sold trees spent 26 per cent on contingencies, mainly marriages (22 per cent), and 73 per cent in investment - in land (38 per cent), on other productive expenditure (21 per cent), and on housing (14 per cent) (Shah 1987). Trees can be good savings banks and insurance for the poor, and their potential appears as vast as it has been unrecognised.

A programme thrust for secure rights and appreciating assets also points straight at land reform. Secure land ownership is often a high priority for the poor. The IRDP can be seen as an evasion, a second or third best, after land reform has failed. If non-punitive land reform were examined realistically, with full and fair compensation envisaged to landowners, it might be revealed as more feasible politically than supposed. It might prove better value for money than the IRDP, and closer to the priorities of the poor.

#### Reversals and Reality

This paper is an exploration. It contains untested assertions. It imputes wishes and needs to poor people. The style is neither very humble nor very self-doubting. A charitable view might attribute this to the need for brevity, or to the difficulty an affluent person has in writing about the poor. Even if this paper does help, however little, in raising questions and mapping terrain, it will fail if it gives an unwarranted impression of authority. A paper written at a distance is no substitute for real reversals or for direct experience, self-examination, questioning perceptions, sensitive listening and learning, and enabling poor people themselves to think through and articulate their problems and priorities.

Not least this is because people and conditions differ. Papers need to generalise. Big bureaucracies need standard programmes. Busy academics need routine methodologies. But the realities they address are diverse. For action to fit, diagnosis must differentiate. So the final implication concerns method and approach. It is for those who want to enable the poor to better their lot to invent and improve methods for research and learning; to doubt their perceptions, see the unexpected, and be willing to throw out pet ideas; to accept and embrace diversity; and to be ruled by reality. Policy and research require reversals, so that method does not define reality, but reality determines method. When that occurs, policy and research can then evolve to fit not the standardising needs and strategies of bureaucrats and academics, but the varied and real needs and strategies of the poor.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Lipton's technical definition of the poor and the ultra poor is as follows: 'Poverty here means insufficient income (or outlay) to provide household members with 100% of 1973 average FAO/WHO caloric requirements of their age, sex and activity groups, when the household allocates income (or outlay) among foods, and between them and non-foods, typically for households with its size, age- and sex-structure, and income (or outlay). 'Ultra-poverty' replaces '100%', with '80%' in the above definition. Poverty and ultra-poverty may be assessed by surveying (per-person or per-CU) household income or outlay, food consumption, food/outlay ratios, caloric intake relative to requirements, or anthropometric status' (Lipton 1983b: 110).

<sup>2</sup> N.S. Jodha heads his 1985 paper with an apposite quotation from A. Smith's 'Super Money', called the McNamara Fallacy:

- The first step is to measure whatever can be easily measured: This is OK as far as it goes.
- The second step is to disregard that which cannot be measured or give it an arbitrary quantitative value: This is artificial and misleading.
- The third step is to disregard that which cannot be measured: This is blindness.
- The fourth step is to say that what cannot be easily measured really does not exist: This is suicide.

<sup>3</sup> The full title was the Workshop on Rural Economic Change in South Asia: Differences in Approach and in Results Between Large-Scale Surveys and Intensive Micro-Studies, Bangalore, India, August 5-8 1985.

<sup>4</sup> An agroforestry programme in Haiti allowed small farmers to treat trees as cash crops and told them 'You Will be the Owners of Any Trees Planted' and 'As Far as We're Concerned, You Can Cut the Trees When you Want'. (Murray 1984:153; see also Murray 1986). The result was contrary to what many with conventional views of the poor expected. In a letter (1986) Gerald Murray writes:

Peasants originally plant the trees with a view to income generation, but may end up reserving the trees as insurance against emergencies. This meant that, though the tree planting went much faster than we ever dreamed possible because of the cash-generating focus, the tree harvesting is going much slower because of the risk calculus of the peasant owners. (Skeptics had predicted just the opposite; the stubborn traditional peasants

would of course refuse to plant trees or do so slowly;  
and once having planted the greedy impatient would vie  
with each other in rapidly cutting them down).

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APPENDIX A. INDIA - INDICATORS BY STATE

	I	II	III	IV	V	VI		VII		VIII		IX	
	POP	RURAL	%	RURAL	PER CAPITA	LITERACY		VITAL RATES		1982			
	81	POP	RURAL	%	INCOME 83/84	F	M	AV OF 79-81	CDR	RURAL	URBAN		
	81	81	81	BELOW	CURRENT PRICES			AV OF 79-81		IMR			
				POVERTY									
				LINE 77/78									
ANDHRA PRADESH	53.5	41.1	77	44	1,985	21	39	31.8	11.6	86	30		
ASSAM	18.9	17.8	90	53	1,782	na	na	32.7	11.4	3	72		
BIHAR	68.9	61.2	88	59	1,174	14	35	38.4	14.7	116	60		
GUJARAT	34.1	23.5	69	43	2,795	32	55	35.1	12.4	120	88		
HARYANA	12.9	10.1	78	23	3,147	22	48	36.8	11.0	100	62		
HIMACHAL P	4.3	4.0	92	28	2,230	31	52	31.6	10.8	70	42		
J AND K	6.0	4.7	79	33	1,820	na	na	31.3	9.3	74	43		
KARNATAKA	37.1	26.4	71	50	1,957	28	49	28.2	9.8	71	47		
KERALA	25.5	20.7	81	46	1,761	65	74	26.2	6.9	32	24		
MADHYA P	52.2	41.6	80	60	1,636	16	40	37.4	15.6	145	79		
MAHARASHTRA	62.8	40.8	65	56	3,032	35	59	28.3	10.0	77	55		
ORISSA	26.4	23.3	88	69	na	21	47	31.8	14.0	129	64		
PUNJAB	16.8	12.1	72	12	3,691	34	47	29.6	9.2	82	53		
RAJASTHAN	34.3	27.1	79	34	560	11	36	36.8	13.3	105	60		
TAMIL NADU	48.4	32.5	67	64	648	34	57	28.2	11.7	97	51		
UTTAR P	110.9	91.0	82	59	497	14	39	39.5	16.4	156	99		
W BENGAL	54.6	40.1	74	34	779	30	51	31.5	11.3	93	52		
ALL INDIA	685.2	525.5	77	51		25	47	33.2	13.7	114	65		

Sources: UNICEF 1986, A Review of the Situation of Children in India; Tata Services Ltd. Statistical Outline of India; World Bank 1985, India Structural Change and Development Perspectives

APPENDIX B: SOME ASSETS OF THE POOR: COSTS, RISKS AND BENEFITS COMPARED

POSITIVE VALUES		Jewel- lery	Large Stock (cattle buffaloes, camels etc)	Small Stock (sheep, goats, hens etc)	Land	Bank Deposits	Trees
LOW COSTS	Low unit starting costs	-	-	0	=/-	0	+
	Low maintenance costs - herding, protection etc	+	-	-	-	++	+/-
LOW RISKS	Low disease vulnera- bility - to damage to drought	++	-	-	+	++	+/-
	theft	-	-	-	+	++	+/-
RIGHTS SECURE	Property rights and cashability assured	++	+	++	+	++	=/0 <sup>(1)</sup>
HIGH BENEFITS	Rises fast in value (appreciates, breeds etc)	0	+	++	+/0	- <sup>(2)</sup>	++/0 <sup>(3)</sup>
	Stores well	++	-	-	+	++	++
	Easy to pledge, mortgage or use as security for loan	++	+	0	+	( )	+?
	Provides flows of income food etc	-	+	+	+	0	+
	Easy to transport	++	+	+	( )	++	-
	Divisible/small units for cashing	+/-	-	+	+/-	++	+
	Good price for small amount	0	( )	+	0	++	+/-
	Steady price	+	0	+	+	(++)	+
	Avoids obvious distress sale	+	-	0	-	++	+
	Regenerate after disposal	-	-	-	-	-	+/-

++ = strongly positive (good)      - = usually negative (bad)  
 + = usually positive (good)      = = strongly negative (bad)  
 0 = more or less neutral      +/- = sometimes positive sometimes negative  
 ( ) = not applicable

Source: Chambers and Leach 1988

NOTES

(1) This is highly variable, but complete freedom to cut and sell appears to be exceptional where government regulations or programmes are involved.

(2) It has been common in recent years for inflation to exceed the interest rates for savings bank accounts.

(3) In good conditions. There are major differences between high rates of growth in much of the humid and semi-humid tropics, and slower rates in temperate climates and in the semi-arid and arid tropics.