

## Policy Environment and the World of the Rural Poor

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Poverty eradication has been the most challenging task of Indian planning since its inception. Central and state governments have repeatedly been showing their commitment for combating the poverty. There has been a near consensus among different political parties on this issue. Constitutional amendments, laws and acts, commissions and inquiries and implementation of various employment generation schemes have been the major forms of state intervention for poverty eradication. Speeches and slogans by leaders of nearly all the political parties and their wide publicity through newspapers and magazines have given the impression that the problem of poverty concerns all in this democratic country. Recently, through the direct intervention of NGOs and international agencies, the message is being spread that it is not the national government alone but the world community that has joined hands for the upliftment of India's poor. The Planning Commission of India expects to bring down the percentage of people below the poverty line from 28% to 21% during the tenth five-year plan.

The present paper is based on three hypotheses: - first, there was a nexus between the dominant sections of the village and the grassroots functionaries of public institutions. Second, whereas there was a genuine concern at the national level for improvement in the conditions of the poor, the functioning agencies for implementation of the policies at the grassroots are more inclined to favour the *status quo*. This leads to a vast gap between the intentions of the policy framers and grassroots functionaries responsible for implementation. The measure by which this gap would widen the nexus, as stated above, would be stronger and vice-versa. Third, the living conditions of the poor in the villages depend upon the environment created by the nexus so formed. If there were to be organizations in existence to build pressures in favour of the poor, the gap would be reduced and the nexus would be weakened. In the absence of such organizations, there would be no

resistance and life would move on as usual for everybody; the gap would widen making the nexus stronger.

In the present paper we are dealing with people who are landless, live in dingy hutments on someone else's land, struggling to make both ends meet all through life and whose women folk are illiterate while the men are only just able to sign their names. In sickness they are at the mercy of quacks. They have hardly benefitted from numerous schemes launched by governments and have not been visited by state functionaries barring the local police and forest staff whose sight causes a wave of terror as such visitors cause harassment. They are born in indebtedness, die in indebtedness and consequently are condemned to live as bonded labourers. The present paper underlines the world of such people.

The world of the poor like these demands a micro level study so that the impact of the existing policy environment on it can be analyzed in real terms. It cannot be assessed at macro level with secondary data because the visibility of extreme situations of poverty gets reduced in the averages. It has always been considered better to look at the micro level as far as possible in order to get the real picture of the lives of the rural poor, for in macro level studies we often fail to expose the gravity of the problem. Even in micro level research, most of the researchers prefer to design their studies at the village panchayat or revenue village level. This methodology fails to uncover the real world of the poor. For example, a village has a number of habitations or hamlets of weaker sections formed at shorter or greater distance from the main habitation that consists of dominant sections of the village. If one were to take the village into consideration, the reality of poor living on the periphery of the village would be missed out. Therefore the study of the world of the rural poor in this paper has been based upon the habitation level.

### The Sample

The sampled habitation was selected from village Sansarpur in block Koraon of Allahabad district.. Sansarpur village with a population of around 3000 is situated nearly 90kms from the district headquarters and about 12kms from the tehsil and block headquarters. It is one of the remotest villages and quite close to the state boundary with Madhya Pradesh. It has five habitations. The major cultivating castes reside in twin habitations – *Sansarpur and Sahibinpur*. All public facilities - the government junior high school, the public distribution shop, the post office etc. - are located between them. The third habitation - *Charki* – is

close to these habitations and is inhabited predominantly by Chamars, a scheduled caste and Gaderias, a caste belonging to the most backward category. The fourth and fifth habitations - *Kanaiya and Antreji* – are in the south of the village at a distance of around 3kms from the main habitations. These two habitations are close to the forest of Vindhya and are inhabited predominantly by *Kols and Dhaikars*, both belonging to the scheduled castes category. Interestingly, the *Kols* prefer to be identified as *adivasis* (tribals) and are categorized as such in the neighbouring state of Madhya Pradesh.

**Table 1**  
**Distribution of Households by caste and location in Sansarpur village**

Habitations	Kol	Non-Kol SC	OBC	General	Total
Sansarpur	20	6	125	20	161
Sahigunpur	1	10	110	10	141
Charki	-	55	80	10	145
Kanya	13	10	10	6	39
Antreji	37	2	13	-	52
Total	71	83	238	46	538

One of the last two habitations, Antreji, was selected for the present study. It is situated on the sides of an all-weather metaled road which connects the national highway-7 running between Varanasi and Bombay and is about 15kms away from the sampled habitation. In *Antreji* there were 52 households out of which 6 belonged to Muslims, 6 Kurmis, 2 Chamars, 1 Yadav and 37 Kols. The *Kol* households were predominantly rural labour households.

### The World of the Rural Poor

The focus of the present paper is the world of the Kol households in the existing policy environment. Their world has been divided into five headings- landlessness, food insecurity, livelihood, benefits from developmental schemes and bondedness.

### 1. Landlessness

Poverty is directly linked with landlessness. The issue ought to be viewed in the sphere of agricultural as well as house site land ownership.

### Agricultural Land

According to the revenue departmental data out of 530 households in Sansarpur 3% were landless, 10 marginal farmers, 50% small farmers, 25 and 12% medium and big farmers respectively.

The revenue department has categorised the agricultural land into four categories in terms of ownership. The distribution pattern in Sansarpur is given below:

**Table 2**  
**Distribution of agricultural land by the nature of tenures**

Category of tenure		Irrigated		Unirrigated		Total	
		No. of hh	Land (in ha)	No. of hh	Land (in ha)	No. of hh	Land (in ha)
I	Bhumidhar with Transferable rights	350	615.265	-			

II	Bhumidhar with Non-transferable rights	-	-	80	76.587		
III	Asami patta	-	-	70	24.760		
IV	Ceiling patta	-	-	12	25.333		
All categories combined		350	615.265	162	126.680	512	741.945

Category 1 I is ancestral land and around 65% of households possessed land in this category. Category 2 land was gram samaj land, which was allotted to erstwhile landless households in the form of patta prior to 1995, but by an order of the state government these households have been granted non-transferable entitlements. The proportion of such households was about 15% of the total households. About 13% households were allotted land in Category 3, termed *asami* land which means the gram samaj land allotted for a particular period, ranging from one to five years, to a landless person. The fourth category of land allotted to the landless had been confiscated by the state government from big landowners possessing over and above the announced ceiling level.

In Antreji 63 households were granted the asami patta during 1998-99 with an average land size of 0.75 acres. Out of these 27 households belonged to the Kol category of Antreji. But these allotments were made on land earmarked in revenue records for a pond. Recently the Supreme Court delivered a judgement that in no case could lands earmarked for village ponds be allotted to any one and in pursuance of this order the state governments were directed to ensure that all the allotments made on pond lands should be immediately cancelled. As a consequence the asami patta granted to the Kol households of Antreji along with others were cancelled. Twenty out of these 27 Kol households did not have any piece of land at any other place in the village. So they had now become landless again and thus the proportion of landless households in Sansarpur village increased to around 6.%. Nearly two thirds of such landless belonged to the Kol category and three-fourths of them reside in Antreji.

#### House Sites

According to section 122-C of the ZA and Land Reform Act, the sub-divisional magistrate on his own or on the motion of the Land Management Committee, shall

earmark any land for the provision of *abadi* sites for the members of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and agricultural labourers and village artisans. In sub-section 3 of the same section, an order of preference has been mentioned which states that the first preference shall be given to an agricultural labourer or village artisan residing in the village and belonging to SC/ST, the next shall be any other agricultural labourer or village artisan residing in the village and lastly any other person residing in the village and belonging to a SC/ST.

Now let us see the situation in Antreji. Out of 37 Kol households 22 were residing on the private land of a big landholder of the same village for the past three to four decades. For some families, three generations have been raised and brought up on the same land. Yet they did not have any right of possession. On the other hand, neither had the LMC ever passed any proposal to allot any *abadi* site for these poor households nor had the SDM initiated any proceeding in this direction.

#### Dwellings

It would be interesting to look at the housing condition of Kol households in Antreji. Each family has a separate dwelling. All the dwellings were constructed by using locally available resources - stone boulders from the hills, bamboo, wood and grass from the forest and earthen tiles from the village potter. No hired labour was involved in the construction; the entire work was done by the family or the community on a sharing basis. An outsider would assess the market value of these dwellings somewhere between 10000 rupees to 40000 rupees, depending upon the size. An enumerator of a survey agency might consider these dwellings as an asset of the household. But it would lead to a wrong conclusion because these dwellings do not have any resale value as the land on which these dwellings are constructed belongs to someone else.

### Indira Awaas Yojna

The Ministry of Rural Development, GOI is running a rural housing programme for the last two decades, the Indira Awaas Yojna. Any beneficiary under this programme is entitled to receive Rs. 17000 for constructing his own house and another Rs. 3000 is given to construct a toilet in the same house. By 1995-96, 17 people in Sansarpur had received financial aid for house construction under this scheme, after which no beneficiary received any aid under IAY. Out of these 17 persons, 40% belonged to the two principal habitations, 50% belonged to the third habitation and

only 10% to the fifth habitations. No one has been selected from Kanaiya as yet for assistance under IAY. The secretary of the village panchayat clarified the situation by saying that since the remaining poor households in Antreji did not possess any land of their own, they could not have been able to construct their houses even if they were provided with aid. However 10 out of the 17 selected beneficiaries have been identified as defaulters for not utilising the aid for construction of houses, the implication being that they did not belong to the specified category for the purpose.

**Table 3**

**Distribution of beneficiaries of IAY by caste and location in Sansarpur village**

Habitation	Kol	Non-Kol SC	OBC	General	Total
Sansarpur	1	-	2	-	3
Sahigunpur	1	2	1	-	4
Charki	-	5	2	1	8
Kanya	-	-	-	-	-
Antreji	1	-	1	-	2
Total	3	7	6	1	17

### 2. Food Insecurity

Non-availability of food or the incidence of hunger is the most visible indicator of poverty. In Antreji on two occasions in a year i.e. during the days of continuous rains in the monsoon and during the days of extreme cold and thick fog in winter, poor households are forced to starve for a couple of days as there is no work during those days either in mines, forest or fields. They are left with no option except to borrow or beg food grains from their employers.

#### Targeted Public Distribution System

In order to provide a safety net and safeguard the interests of the rural poor, the union government on the recommendation of the chief ministers' conference in June 1996 reformed the Public Distribution System by introducing the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS) from June 1997. In the new system beneficiaries are classified into two categories on the basis of the poverty line, families below the poverty line (BPL) and

above the poverty line (APL). Separate cards are issued to differentiate the categories i.e. white cards for BPL families and yellow cards for APL families. Under the TPDS, the government is committed to issue 10 kgs of food grains per month per BPL family at a price equal to half the economic cost of FCI which at present comes to Rs 440/- per quintal at grassroots level.

In Antreji out of 37 Kol households 22 (60%) were given yellow cards which means that they were identified as APL families. Labourer households were perturbed because they were given yellow cards when they are entitled to white cards. They approached the village pradhan, panchayat secretary and lekhpal for correction but no one paid any heed to their request.

**Table 4**

**Distribution of TPDS cards by caste and location in Sansarpur village**

Habitation	Kol		Non-Kol SC		OBC		General		Total	
	BPL	APL	BPL	APL	BPL	APL	BPL	APL	BPL	APL
Sansarpur	14	-	-	4	136	65	5	10	155	79

Sahigunpur	1	-	43	2	42	62	9	13	95	77
Charki	-	-	75	10	71	124	6	11	152	145
Kanya	23	28	-	-	4	30	2	14	27	72
Antreji	11	40	1	1	19	20	-	-	41	61
Total	49	68	119	17	272	301	22	48	470	434

This does not mean that the number of BPL families has declined in Sansarpur.

Out of 966 cards in the village 461 (47.7 %) are BPL cards. There were 2466 units in all and out of these about 52% came under the BPL category. Thus, about 50% households fall in the BPL category. The poor have been deprived of the BPL facilities to which they are entitled and non-entitled households were awarded the benefits. This is a clear example, which proves our first hypothesis that there existed a nexus between dominant sections and grassroots functionaries.

### Antyodaya and Annapurna Schemes

The Annapurna and Antyodaya are two other schemes which provide a safety net for food security for the rural poor. In Sansarpur there were 70 card holders for the Antyodaya scheme, out of which only 40% belonged to the SC category and no one was from Antreji, For the Annapurna scheme, there was only one beneficiary belonging to the SC category residing in the main habitation. Antreji labourers were not even aware of this scheme. The distribution of Annapurna and Antyodaya cards in Sansarpur is given below:

**Table-5**  
**Distribution of Annapurna and Antyodaya cards by caste and location in Sansarpur village**

Habitat ion	Kol		Non-Kol SC		OBC		General		Total	
	anty odaya	anna purna	anty odaya	Anna purna	Anty odaya	Anna purna	anty odaya	ann apurna	anty odaya	Ann apurna
Sansarpur	1	-	6	1	26	-	1	-	34	1
Sahigunpur	1	-	2	-	5	-	1	-	9	-
Charki	1	-	6	-	9	-	-	-	16	-
Kanya	6	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	6	-
Antreji	4	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	5	-
Total	13	-	14	1	41	-	2	-	70	1

### Midday Meal

This scheme also supplements food security for poor households. Under this scheme every school-going child is entitled to 100 grams of food grain per day for ten months in a year up to class VIII. Thus, the family may get 3 kgs of food grain for each school-going child. But the school is in the main habitation which is about 3 kms from Antreji. Many children, particularly the younger ones, could not be enrolled as they are not able to reach the school on foot and therefore are deprived of the benefits of a midday meal.

### 3. Livelihood

While discussing the issue of the rural poor one should not stick to the urban-biased approach of employment. Classical definitions of employment based on working hours and regular wages do not fit into the environment in places like Antreji. There is a case of survival in extremely difficult conditions. They can not think of employment. They are in search of livelihoods for survival. A multiplicity of activities is their survival strategy with more than one activity in a single day. They may not get their wages paid on the same day or in the same form (cash or kind). Working hours are not defined. Next

day's work is uncertain. They have to work in stone quarries that are functioning illegally. If trapped by forest or police officials, they have to suffer the consequences. Whatever the consequence the work, legal or illegal, must go on, for if there are no wages there will be no bread in the home. The Antreji labourer households undertake at least eight types of work in a year as narrated by them and listed below

### **Stone Breaking**

This is the main activity of the sampled labourers. Nearly three-fourths of Kol households in Antreji have taken advances from the contractors of stone quarries in lieu of which they are forced to work on their sites. Skilled male workers who were able to extract stone *patias* are paid Rs 50 per day while unskilled male workers who perform duties like cleaning and digging the pits are paid Rs 30 per day. A female worker is paid Rs 25 a day and for children, wages vary between Rs 15 and 20 per day, The work at quarries is not regular because most of them are running illegally. Whenever mining or forest department officials undertake inspection, the mining gets stopped, leaving the workers without work.

### **Agricultural labourer**

This is the other major source of livelihood for sampled households. Here too they are forced to work in the fields of the land owners on whose land they are residing. They are paid 2 kgs of food grains per day. When the work on the fields of the land owners is over and they seek work on other fields during peak periods of the agricultural season, they face stiff competition from immigrant labourers of the neighboring districts of Madhya Pradesh who are available at lower wages.

### **Tree Felling**

There exists a network between the contractors, forest guards and local police for the illegal felling of trees from the reserved forest areas in and around Antreji. The felling is performed solely by the sampled labourers for which they are paid very low wages and that too on contractual basis after the felling work is complete. At present a contractor pays Rs 50/- for felling a tree and chopping it into

pieces. The tree felling has to take place where the transport vehicle of the contractor can reach it conveniently. Otherwise the labourers have to push the logs up to the roadside for which work they are paid another Rs 35-40/- depending upon the distance to be covered. There is always a high risk of getting arrested by forest guards in which case or if for any other reason the operation is not completed, payment will not be made. In the case of arrest on the charges of illegal tree felling, the labourer has to bribe the forest staff with from Rs 50/- to 500/- for his release. Usually the bribe is paid by the contractor and is accounted by him as a debt to the labourer. In lieu of this debt he is forced to engage himself in illegal tree-felling in the same reserved forest area, will be arrested again, the bribe, the release, the bribed amount again goes into his debt account and again he will be forced to do the same illegal work of tree felling. The process goes on and on.

### **Collection of firewood from forest**

Female members of the sampled households collect firewood. They collect 20-25 pieces of 7-8 feet long stumps from the forest, chop them into 2 feet long pieces and then tie them into 10 bundles, each bundle having 10 pieces, and sell them to agents at the rate of Rs1 per bundle thus earning Rs 10 per day. This work takes a full day's labour. If the men do not have any work, they too join in this activity. It is considered illegal because as per the forest laws they are entitled to collect firewood for their own consumption only and not to sell it. Thus, if and when they so wish, the forest staff will catch hold of these workers, confiscate their tools as punishment and release them only after the bribe is paid. One such bundle will fetch Rs 2 to 2.50 when transported to shopkeepers in the nearby small towns who finally sell it at Rs 5. On a rough estimate, nearly 600 bundles of firewood are exported daily from Antreji by Kol households.

### **Collection of Tendu leaf**

This is not an illegal activity. From May 10 until June 10 every year, the forest department invites tenders from authorised contractors to collect the tendu leaf. The contractors engage labourers from Antreji at the rate of Rs 25 for every

100 leaves. Male and female workers both engage in this activity. Normally they collect 200 leaves in a day and earn Rs 50/- per day.

Although not substantiated, there were reports to the effect that some big, influential bidi manufacturers had hired contractors to get tendu leaves collected illegally. In such operations the wages were low.

#### Collection of minor forest produce

Labourer households of Antreji collect fruits from the forest such as *amla*, *ber*, *chiraunji*, *bel* and *tendu* etc. which constitute supplementary food for their households. They also collect honey from the forest. If collected for domestic consumption, forest laws do not prohibit it but if it is marketed, it becomes illegal. It was found that these items are sold to villagers of nearby habitations by the labourers themselves.

#### Employment in public works

Public works provide employment for very few days to the sampled workers. Usually road construction and its maintenance provide opportunities for employment. Even in public works they do not get the statutory minimum wage. At the time of the survey, earthwork for road construction was in progress and large numbers of workers were employed in this work. The negotiated wage rate was Rs 40/- for 100-sq. ft. which a labourer can do in a day.

#### Sharecropping

Some of the Kol households were engaged in sharecropping. In Antreji a substantial amount of land is owned by landowners residing in the main habitation. None of this land is irrigated and it is not level. Cultivation on these plots is labour intensive and difficult. The landowners find it beneficial to lease it out. Generally it was found that the households who had agricultural land of their own were engaged in sharecropping because they owned a pair of bullocks and implements. Sharecropping helps them for optimum utilisation of their inputs. Out of 37 Kol households 20 (55 %) leased land for sharecropping. The average size of leased-in land was around 2 acres. These households were slightly better off than those who were depending solely on work at stone quarries.

#### 4. Benefits under Poverty Alleviation Schemes

Antreji households have not benefitted from the self-employment scheme known as IRDP or from the three main pension schemes i.e. old age pension, widows' pension and disabled pension. Out of the 12 beneficiaries under the IRDP scheme only one Kol qualified. In Sansarpur 28 beneficiaries are getting support under different pension schemes. However there was only one beneficiary from Antreji who was a disabled person but none from 26 beneficiaries in the old age and widow pension schemes.

**Table-6**

**Distribution of Beneficiaries of IRDP Scheme by Caster and Location in Sansarpur**

Habitation	Kol	Non-Kol SC	OBC	General	Total
Sansarpur	-	-	3	1	4
Sahigunpur	-	-	2	-	2
Charki	-	5	-	-	5
Kanya	-	-	-	-	-
Antreji	1	-	-	-	1
Total	1	5	5	1	12

**Table-7**

**Distribution of Beneficiaries of Old Age Pension Scheme by Caster and Location in Sansarpur**

Habitation	Kol	Non-Kol SC	OBC	General	Total
Sansarpur	-	-	6	-	6

Sahigunpur	-	1	-	-	1
Charki	-	1	4	1	6
Kanya	-	-	-	-	-
Antreji	-	-	-	1	1
Total	-	2	10	2	14

**Table-8**  
**Distribution of Beneficiaries of Widow Pension Scheme by Caster and Location in Sansarpur**

Habitation	Kol	Non-Kol SC	OBC	General	Total
Sansarpur	-	-	7	-	7
Sahigunpur	1	-	1	1	3
Charki	-	1	1	-	2
Kanya	-	-	-	-	-
Antreji	-	-	-	-	-
Total	1	1	9	1	12

**Table-9**  
**Distribution of Beneficiaries of Disabled Pension Scheme by Caster and Location in Sansarpur**

Habitation	Kol	Non-Kol SC	OBC	General	Total
Sansarpur	-	-	-	-	-
Sahigunpur	-	-	1	-	1
Charki	-	-	-	-	-
Kanya	-	-	-	-	-
Antreji	1	-	-	-	1
Total	1	-	1	-	2

### 5. Indebtedness and Bondedness

Most of the stone breaker Kol households had borrowed money from the contractors and were forced to work at their illegal stone quarries for low wages. It was found that debts were generally required for four purposes; first, grain borrowing for food during no-work periods, second, organising family ceremonies like marriages, funeral etc, third, to meet medical expenses for treatment of ailments in the family and lastly to pay bribes to forest or police personnel in cases of arrest while working on illegal sites. In the last case since the bribe money did not pass through his hand, he did not know the exact amount paid as bribe. The contractor simply informed him verbally that this or that amount was paid to the police or forest staff for his release. This is a new form of indebtedness which is prevalent in the area on the strength of the nexus between the contractors, local police and forest staff. In recent years medical expenses emerged as another

major cause of indebtedness. Large debts were reportedly taken for this purpose, ranging from Rs 2000 to 10000 per indebted household. During the last five years the frequency of receiving advances was as high as 7 times among Kol labourer households.

There were cases when a person was bonded because his father had taken loans he could not pay and passed away. The debt was shifted to his son. Our findings are quite similar to Kripa Shankar's observations in his study in the neighbouring block of Halia in Mirzapur district during 1996. He termed such labourers as bonded from childhood who had little idea what their forefathers had taken but invariably they themselves had borrowed cash or grains. Nearly all the Kol households who were working in stone quarries were under debt from childhood. Although they were aware of the amount they owed to the contractor, they were never informed how much money had



been adjusted in the form of wage-cuts. No labourer was free to leave the site unless he cleared the dues about which he was never informed properly. Even then they considered the behaviour of moneylender as cooperative and humane because no alternative was within their sight.

### **Conclusion**

The above descriptions of the world of the poor in Antreji confirm that there exists a strong nexus between the dominant sections represented by the landowner-cum-contractors and grassroots functionaries of forest, police, development and revenue departments. There is a vast gap between the stated policy objectives and their implementation at village level. The labourers do not have the courage to resist and are not in a position to raise any voice against the misdeeds of this nexus. Debt bondedness is in vogue and gaining strength day by day in spite of constitutional provisions and numerous laws and declarations at national and international levels against it. There is no organization that speaks in favour of these ill-fated labourers.

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