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Rural Poverty in India: An Empirical Study

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Abstract: The world celebrated the arrival of the new millennium a few months ago with great euphoria and fanfare. The grand festivities marking the dawn of the new millennium, beamed by the electronic media from the metropolitan centres of the globe to its remotest comers, were indeed breathtaking spectacles. Much has been written and spoken about the spectacular promises the new millennium holds for humankind. Amidst all the hype and hoopla about the new millennium, which, it may be noted, was largely confined to the world's affluent metropolitan centres, twenty-four philosophy students of the Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, Pontifical Institute of Philosophy and Religion, Pune, got together and posed this question: "What does the new millennium hold for those languishing in the margins of society, the poorest of the poor, whose concern is not the next millennium but the next meal?" Enterprising as they were, they decided to find out for themselves. Under the direction of two faculty members, they prepared a field study project to investigate this question in a systematic fashion. During their vacation they travelled to the most backward areas of rural India, lived with the poorest of the poor and listened to them as they spoke about their lives: their difficulties and struggles and struggles, anxieties and fears, hopes and dreams, and how they make sense of it all. This essay attempts to highlight what these young men learned about poverty from the victims of poverty.

Keywords: Church, Rural India, Priestly formation, Poverty, Victims

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Rural Poverty in India

An Empirical Study¹

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The world celebrated the arrival of the new millennium a few months ago with great euphoria and fanfare. The grand festivities marking the dawn of the new millennium, beamed by the electronic media from the metropolitan centres of the globe to its remotest corners, were indeed breathtaking spectacles. Much has been written and spoken about the spectacular promises the new millennium holds for humankind.

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of the most backward areas of rural India, lived with the poorest of the poor and listened to them as they spoke about their lives: their difficulties and struggles, anxieties and fears, hopes and dreams, and how they make sense of it all. This essay attempts to highlight what these young men learned about poverty from the victims of poverty.²

1. Methodology

First, a word about the methodology. The study was conducted in five different locations across India: Langara village in the Almora district of Uttar Pradesh, Venkatarapur village in the Ganjam district of Orissa, Panchkui village in the Jabua district of Madhya Pradesh, Poondi and Kavunchi villages in the Kodai hills of Tamil Nadu, and Adimalathurai and Poonthurai villages in the Thiruvananthapuram district of Kerala.

As far as possible, all the households in the sample villages were surveyed. In all 860 households participated in the study. The sample households were more or less evenly distributed across the five states.

The data was collected by interviewing an adult member from each of

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the sample households, usually the housewife or the head of the household. The interview was conducted using a structured questionnaire, which was designed to elicit information on the following: the extent and dimensions of poverty, the attitudes and perceptions of the poor, and the role of religion in their lives.

In addition to the interview, the investigators employed also the observation method to check the reliability of interview data and to collect additional information.

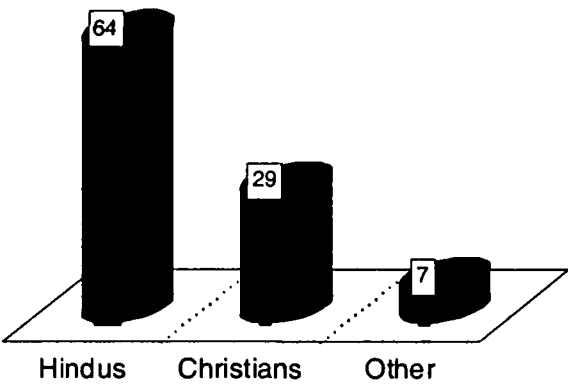
2. Profile of the Respondents

Sixty percent of the respondents were male, and 40% female. The median age of the respondents was 42. On the average, there were 6.22 persons in a household: 3 adults and 3.22 children.

Nearly two-thirds of the respondents (64%) were Hindus, 29% Christians, and 7% belonged to other religions (Chart 1).

In terms of social status, two-thirds of our respondents (67%) were Harijans or members of lower castes. Only a few (12%) belonged to the higher castes. The rest (20%) were either tribals or members of religions which do not recognise the caste system.

Chart 1. Respondents by Religion (%)



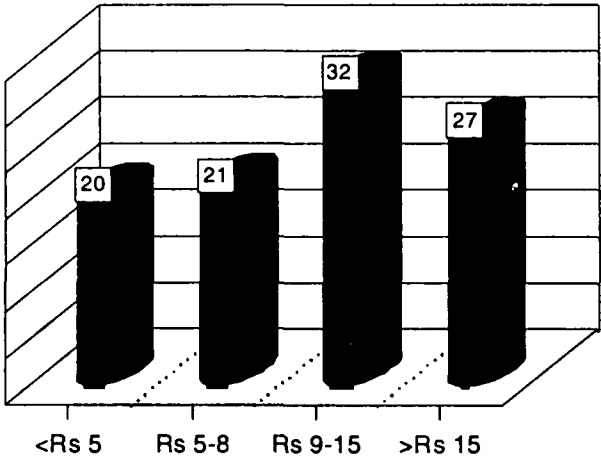
Occupation-wise our respondents fell into three main categories: daily wage earning agricultural workers (25%), farmers (22%) and fishermen (27%). There were very few who were unemployed; many, however, were underemployed. In fact, less than half of them were able to find work on all the days of the previous week.

3. Dimensions of Poverty

A. Low Income

The mean per capita daily income of the rural families in our sample is Rs 12.38. Grouped data on daily per capita income is given in Chart 2. Fortyone percent had per capita daily income of Rs 8 or less; in fact 20% had a daily income of Rs 5 or less. About one-third had daily income between Rs 9 and 15; only 27% earned Rs 15 or more a day.

Chart 2. Per Capita Daily Income (%)



The most-widely accepted measure of poverty in India is the 'Head Count Ratio'. It measures the proportion of population below a level of income defined as the 'poverty line'. The poverty line is an estimate of the income necessary to purchase a rudimentary food basket, which, when consumed, yields a minimum level of calories (2400 calories per day for rural popu-

lation and 2200 for urban). The Head Count Ratio is computed on the basis of the data on consumption expenditure collected by National Sample Surveys (NSS) every five years.

The rural poverty line was computed in 1973-74 as Rs1.63 per day or Rs 49 per month. At 1993-94 prices, it was estimated as Rs 6.86 per day per person or Rs 206 per month. The official estimate of the poverty line at current prices is not available. If we use an inflator similar to the one used to update the poverty line in 1993-94, the rural poverty line in 1998-99 would be Rs 8.43 per day or Rs 253 per month. By this reckoning, the proportion of the rural poor according to our data would be 40.6% in 1998-99. This is slightly higher than the NSS estimate of rural poverty for 1993-94, which was 39.65% (Parikh 1999:53).

Measurement of poverty on the basis of poverty-line, especially the Head Count Ratio, has been mired in controversy over methodology of data collection, empirical estimation procedures, and computation of the poverty-line (Sharif 1999: 24-47).

The present study, therefore, attempted to gauge poverty also in respects other than income such as hunger, indebtedness, illiteracy, housing, availability of safe drinking water and electricity, and ownership of house-hold consumer durables. We shall now look at these aspects of poverty.

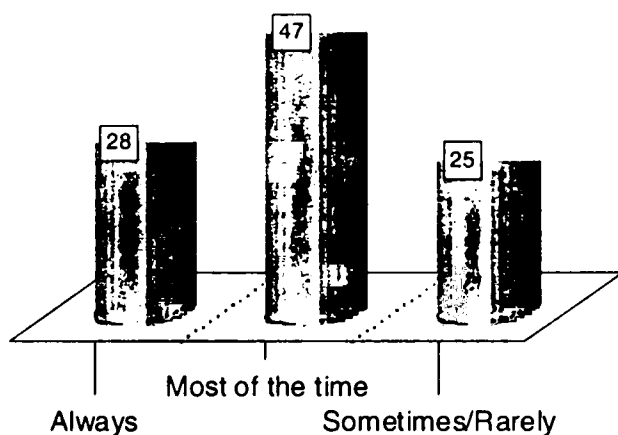
B. Hunger

To a straightforward question: "does your family have enough to eat?," 28% said that their families get enough to eat *always*; 47% said they have

enough to eat *most of the time*; and one-fourth reported that they had enough to eat only *sometimes or rarely*. In other words, more than two-thirds go hungry some of the time, and one-fourth go hungry most of the time (Chart 3).

The regular diet of our respondents consisted of rice or *chappati*, *dal* (lentils) and/or a vegetable. About 21% eat meat once a week, the rest cannot afford to eat meat except perhaps on certain special occasions during the year. About a third of the respondents have fish as part of their regular diet, but then the vast majority of these are fishermen. The average rural family spends on food only 9.84 Rupees per person per day.

Chart 3. Do you have enough to eat? (%)



We have seen that the average per capita daily income of rural India is Rs 12.38. Of this Rs 9.84 is spent on food alone, and a person is left with Rs 2.54 for all other expenses.

Are they eating better food now than they did ten years ago? 38% said their families can now afford better food than they did ten years ago; almost as many (37%) felt that they were worse off now than ten years ago with regard to the kind of food they eat. The rest said there was no difference between then and now.

C. *Indebtedness*

With such meagre income levels, it is not surprising that the majority of the rural population are in debt. 71% of the rural households have no savings at all; more than 60% are in debt. 27% have debts of up to Rs 5000, 35% owe more than Rs 5000, and 28 % have debts larger than Rs 10,000.

The average monthly household income is Rs 2081; the average amount of interest paid out on debts per household is Rs 758. This means, on an average, more than a third of a household's total income, 36% to be precise, has to be set aside merely for paying interest on their borrowing.

When we asked our respondents why they had to borrow money, several reasons were cited. The most frequently mentioned reasons were: medical treatment, arrangement of the daughter's marriage, buying food, and house repairs.

D. *Illiteracy*

The illiteracy rate among our respondents (1998-99) were even higher than the national average (48%) according to the 1991 census. The majority of our respondents (52%) had never been to

school. Thirty percent had spent one to five years in school. Only 18% had attended school beyond the primary level. In fact, only about 7% had completed matriculation or the 10th standard (Chart 4).

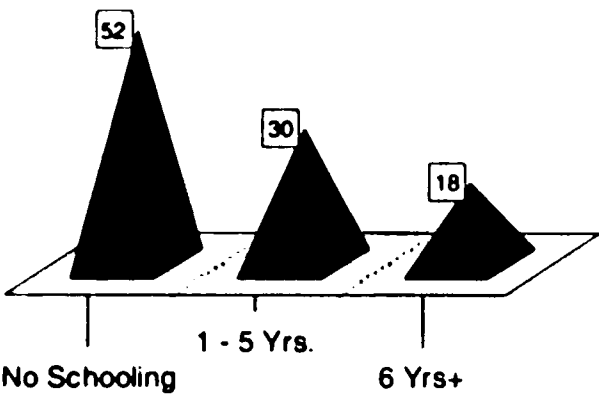
Illiteracy among the females were markedly higher than among the males. Nearly two-thirds of the women (64%) in our sample had never been to school in contrast to 44% of the men. 23% of the men had six or more years of education, while for women the corresponding figure is 11% (Table 1).

Table 1. Adult Illiteracy by Gender (%)

Years of Schooling	Male	Female
No schooling	44	64
One to five years	33	25
Six or more years	23	11

It is sometimes suggested that the poor do not go to school because they do not appreciate the value of education. Our findings do not support this hypothesis. The overwhelming majority (83%) disagreed with the statement: "For the poor, going to school is a waste of time." In fact, almost all (91%) were of the view that they would have been better off if they had the opportunity to study more. Nor was illiteracy owing to lack of access to a school. 87% of our respondents reported that they had a school within walking distance (3 kms.) when they were of school-going age. Indeed, for as many as 60% there was a school within a kilometre. The reason for their illiteracy, therefore, has to be sought elsewhere. Our findings indicate that they did not go to school because poverty forced most of them to

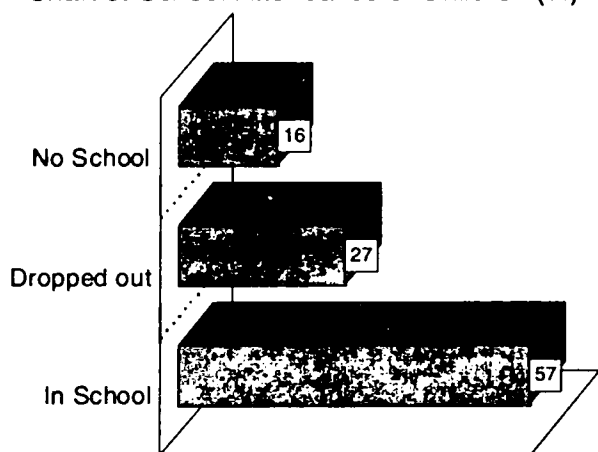
Chart 4. Adult Illiteracy (%)



go to work when they were of school going age. 35% reported that they had already started working by the time they were 12 years old; another 36% went to work when they were aged between 13 and 15. So, as many as 71% of our respondents were part of the work force by the time they were 15.

As Chart 5 reveals, the children of our respondents are somewhat more fortunate than their parents with regard to schooling. There were in all 2182 children of school-going age in the 860 families we surveyed. Of these 57% were attending school at the time of the survey. 16% had never been to school and 27% had dropped out of school. Among those who had never attended school, there was a larger proportion of girls (20%) than boys (13%).

Chart 5. School Attendance of Children (%)



E. Land and Livestock

Forty-two percent of the families owned no land at all. One-third of the households owned less than an acre, and one-fourth had an acre or more. Even among those who did own some land, 25% could not generate any income from it.

Livestock was a source of income for some of the rural households. About

30% of the households owned one or more cows, buffaloes, goats or bulls. Other than land and livestock, hardly any other income generating assets were reported by the families.

F. Housing, Electricity and Drinking Water

About two-thirds of the families lived in thatched houses. In a large number of cases, the roof as well as the walls of these houses were made of straw or leaves. Others had thatched roofs and walls of mud or stone. Less than ten percent of the households lived in houses with tiled roofs and brick walls.

About a third of the houses consisted of a single room, which served as their living room, bed room, kitchen and store; another one-third had two rooms including kitchen; the rest had three or more rooms.

Nearly sixty percent of the households had no electricity. The majority of households (54%) had to travel half a kilometre or more to fetch drinking water. In fact, for about one-third of the families, the nearest source of drinking water was more than one kilometre away.

G. Consumer Durables

Our investigators also attempted to identify the households which owned common consumer durables like radios, tape recorders, television sets, bicycles, mopeds or scooters.

As might be expected, the majority (57%) owned none of these household articles. 21% owned a radio, 5%, a TV, and 1%, a tape recorder. Only 12% of the households had the privilege of

owning a bicycle, which in India is the poor man's transportation.

4. Perceptions, Attitudes and Feelings of the Poor .

We have looked at poverty as different forms of material deprivation. But poverty is not only material deprivation; it is also a form of consciousness, a set of perceptions, attitudes and feelings. How do the poor feel about and make sense of their life and their world? What are their anxieties and fears, hopes and dreams? What role does religion play in shaping their world-view? It is to these questions that we shall now turn.

A. Poverty: Causes and Remedies

What, according to the poor, are the main causes of the deprivation they suffer,

Table 2. Causes of Poverty according to the Poor (%)

Illiteracy	31
Unemployment/underemployment	31
Lack of land and/or resources	29
Drinking (alcoholism)	21
Poor/corrupt governance	18
Exploitation/unjust wages	16
Lack of irrigation/poor crops	14
Poor catch (fish)	9
Laziness	6
Overpopulation	5
Debt	5
Fate/sin	4
Other	6

and what steps, in their view, will help to alleviate poverty? First the causes.

As Table 2 shows, the main causes of poverty according to the poor are illiteracy, unemployment, and lack of land and income generating assets. Quite a few attribute it to alcoholism, ineffective and corrupt government, exploitation, and lack of irrigation or poor crops. The gender and education level of the respondents did not appear to have any significant influence on the perception of the causes of poverty.

The major steps the poor suggest to alleviate poverty are: education (36%), government initiative (23%), employment (22%) and hard work (12%). It is interesting to note that a substantial 27% of the respondents could not think of any step to remedy poverty.

B. Anxieties of the Poor

The poor, needless to say, have a lot to be anxious about. As Table 3 indicates, the number one worry of the poor is how to feed their hungry stomachs. Anxiety about the future of their

Table 3: Worries of the Poor (%)

Lack of food	34
Future of the children	33
Lack of land / resources	22
Debt	19
Crop failure	18
Dowry for daughter's marriage	17
Sickness	14
House repair	14

children is a close second. Lack of land and resources, debt, inability to come up with dowry for the daughter's marriage, failure of crops, sickness, and house repair are other frequently mentioned worries of India's rural poor.

In order to check what the most pressing needs of the poor are, we asked

them: "Suppose someone were to give you Rs 5000, what would you do with it?" The most common answer (30%) was that they would use the money to pay back their debts. There were also quite a few who said that they would spend it to repair the house (13%) or buy food (12%).

C. *Sense of Powerlessness and Fatalism*

The findings reported in Table 4 highlight the sense of powerlessness and

fatalism that throttle the lives of the poor. Almost all of them share the

Table 4. Powerlessness and Fatalism of the Poor (%)

	<i>True</i>	<i>False</i>	<i>Not sure</i>
In this country might is right; the poor cannot hope to get justice	92	6	2
The government is concerned about the welfare of the poor	16	79	5
The poor trust the police to protect them against injustice.	7	72	21
The rich have no concern for the poor; they only exploit them.	76	15	9
Day by day life is getting harder for me.	66	18	16
No matter what one does, one cannot change one's fate.	73	19	8
There are times when I feel that there is no point in living.	59	36	5

feeling that in this country "might is right" and that the poor cannot hope to get justice. The overwhelming majority are of the view that the government is indifferent to their problems and the rich are only interested in exploiting them. The poor look upon the police as the

agents of the rich and the powerful and do not trust these law enforcement agents to protect them against injustice and harassment.

The vast majority also feel that life is getting harder for them day by day.

What is worse, they feel absolutely powerless to do anything about it. In fact, nearly three-fourths of them believe that no matter what one does, one cannot change one's fate. It is hardly surprising that there are times when they feel there is no point in living.

D. Obscurantist and Oppressive Religiosity

The sense of helplessness and fatalism that dominate the consciousness of the poor are induced, at least in part, by an oppressive religiosity. The poor are a very religious lot. Most of them go regularly to their place of worship and faithfully follow the prescriptions of their religion. Only 2% of our respondents reported that they never go to a place of worship. Three-fourths of them pray privately on a daily basis. However, their beliefs about god(s) and spirits are so obscurantist that they live in perpetual fear of them.

As many as 62% of our respondents believed in evil spirits, which inflict harm on human beings unless they are placated. Almost half of them (47%) said that they believed in black magic. In fact, more than one-third of them (35%) admitted that they had gone to a black magician to cure illnesses, to exorcize evil spirits, or to know what the future holds for them.

Misfortunes happen because the gods are angry according to 39% of the respondents. When asked why there is suffering in the world, 40% said that it is God's will or God's punishment; 13%, mostly Hindus, attributed it to one's karma. Hardly any one pointed to class

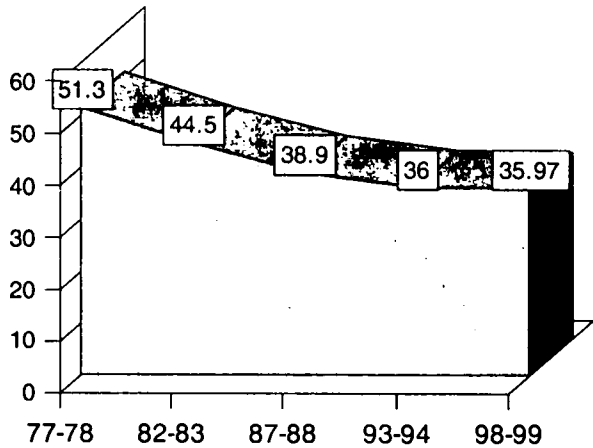
conflicts, unjust structures, or relationships of dominance as possible causes of suffering in the world. It is no wonder then that most of them do not entertain any hope of liberation from their misery in this life.

Karl Marx's characterization of religion as "the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, the spirit of spiritless conditions; it is the opium of the people" still rings true for the rural masses of India.

5. Trends in Poverty

What does the new millennium hold for these 'wretched of the earth'? Will life get better for them as the politicians and the votaries of economic liberalization promise? Or, is life getting harder for them as the poor themselves feel? The latest official statistics on poverty put out by the Government of India appear to prove the poor right and the pundits wrong.

Chart 6. Poverty Ratio: 1977-1999



As Chart 6 illustrates, the proportion of population below the poverty line had been declining since the late 1970s, when half of India's population was below the poverty line.³ In the 70s and the 80s, the heyday of the socialist

licence-permit raj, when rationing, price controls, import controls, and nationalization were the order of the day, poverty did fall at an annual rate of nearly three percent, even though during this period the country's economy grew only at a modest 3.5%, which is derisively called the "Hindu rate of growth". In contrast, in the 90s, the period of economic liberalization with its emphasis on free trade, foreign direct investment, dismantling of import controls and privatization, there has been no reduction in the rate of poverty despite the economy having grown by more than five percent per annum during this period. The stark contrast between the reform period of the 90's and the pre-reform period in poverty reduction is certainly disconcerting. The Indian economy, riding on liberalization wave, is growing at a faster pace than ever before; ironically, so are the number of the poor in the country.

Until the nineties the number of the poor in the country had been declining steadily both relatively and absolutely. However, in the era of economic liberalization and faster economic growth, according to the Government's own official estimates, the number of the poor in the country have gone up from 306 million to 360 million, which is equivalent to the total population of the country 50 years ago. The benefits of economic reform have failed to reach the poor; on the contrary, their condition has only worsened. As the Nobel laureate, Amartya Sen, has pointed out: "We must not make the mistake – common in some circles – of taking the growth rate of GNP to be the ultimate test of success

and of treating the removal of illiteracy, ill-health and social deprivation as – at best – possible means to that hallowed end ... The more conventional criteria of economic success (such as high growth rate, a sound balance of payments and so forth) are to be valued only as a means to deeper ends. It would, therefore, be a mistake to see the development of education, health care and other basic achievements as **only** or **primary** expressions of "human resources" – as if people were just the **means** and not its ultimate end" (Sen and Dreze 1989).

Conclusion

India, it is often said, lives in her villages. Our journey to the remotest villages of India revealed to us the dreadful reality of poverty more forcefully than any books, lectures or statistics could ever do. We saw the many faces of poverty. We saw it in the distress of the mothers who cannot feed their starving children; in the pain of a husband who helplessly watched his young wife die because he did not have the money to take her to a hospital; in the anguish of the parents who are unable to marry off their daughters because they cannot come up with the required sum for dowry; in the plight of an old couple who had to sit up all night holding banana leaves over their heads as it was raining and the thatched roof of their dwelling was badly torn; in the struggle of young girls who trek several miles every day to fetch drinking water for their families; in the predicament of the farmer who is forced to borrow ever increasing amounts every month only to pay interest on his debts;

in the misfortune of countless boys and girls growing up in the 21st century knowing neither to read nor to write; in the obscurantist religiosity, which makes them live in constant fear of angry gods and malevolent spirits; in the superstitions that make them resort to black magic to heal sickness and ward off evil; in the inhuman practice which requires women to get out of their home and live in the cattleshed during their menstruation; in the stultifying fatalism that leads to the paralysis of despair. And the most perplexing fact of all is that, with globalization and concomitant liberalization of the economy, any hope of liberation for these “wretched of the earth” seems to be receding.

An episode that took place recently in the city of Rajkot, in the state of Gujarat in western India, highlights the bizarre consequences of mindless eco-

nomie liberalization. During this summer, when there was a severe shortage of water, some innovative traders came up with an imaginative marketing strategy for imported colour televisions. They advertised that 500 litres of clean water will be delivered free of cost, daily for six weeks, at the doorstep of every household which buys a new television set. As a result the sale of colour television sets in Rajkot went up by 70%. One of the customers, who was asked by a journalist why he bought a TV at this time, said: “I do not really need a new television now, but I do need the water.” Imagine having to buy imported colour televisions in order to collect drinking water! That, sadly, is the predicament in which India finds herself today in the wake of the liberalization policies she has been pursuing for nearly a decade now.

Endnotes

1. This is a revised version of a paper presented at the *International Seminar on Poverty and Unemployment* organized jointly by the University of Rome and the University of Milan in Rome in September, 2000, as part of the Jubilee of the Universities of the World.
2. I gratefully acknowledge the contribution of the philosophy students of Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth in designing and executing this study as well as the assistance rendered by my colleague, Dr. Anthony da Silva, SJ, in planning this project.
3. The source of the statistics in this chart is Parikh (1999: 52) except the 1998-99 figure, which was from the reply of the Minister of Planning and Programme Implementation to a question raised in the Rajya Sabha on August 10, 2000 (Indian Express, Pune, August 11, 2000).

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