

Following the release of Sir Tony Atkinson’s book *Inequality* last year, I came across a number of his interviews. I was struck by the air of optimism that was common to most of them. An interview quoted him as follows: “The world faces great problems, but collectively we are not helpless in the face of forces outside our control”. I think the Commission’s report under discussion today and the World Bank’s response – embody much of the spirit of collective action, at one level, that Sir Tony so firmly believes in.

In November, 2015, as part of my doctoral work, I interviewed a 45-year old dalit or Scheduled Caste labourer in Aurangabad district of Maharashtra. His family of six – old parents, sister and her two children and he – live in a house of two adjacent rooms. He works as part of a group of labourers who unload trucks that bring raw materials to the industrial area situated close to their village. When I asked how he sources his job, Veera [not his real name] said “Oh, we go to the highway intersection and wait for the trucks. When they appear we flag them. Sometimes we run behind them...well, the younger boys run now. But we have to show up on the highway. No show, means no work. No truck, means no work.” Veera, is what they call in Maharashtra, a Hamaali worker. In Veera’s household, no adult has completed secondary education and his Hamaali income runs the family.

Maharashtra is the second richest State in India as per income per capita and one of the more industrialised. It has seen an income growth of 12.3% between 2012-13 and 2013-14. Yet, the release of the latest round of national health survey shows that in Maharashtra, 36 per cent of the children under the age of 5 are underweight, a decrease of only 1 percentage point in

the last decade. During the same period, income per capita grew at an average of 7.25% annually (at constant prices). Only this year 245 children died of undernutrition in Palghar district, about 100 kms from Mumbai its capital city. It saw 116 farmers commit suicide between January and March – the first three months alone of this year. A household with an underweight child is clearly deprived, but its suffering is compounded if it simultaneously has no adult with little to no literacy and a precarious mode of self-employment in any sector of the economy, much like Veera.

Using a snippet of my conversation during fieldwork, there are two points I want to make. The first relates to the adoption of a multidimensional non-monetary poverty measure based on the counting approach. The explicit showcasing of nonmonetary poverty measures, like a multidimensional poverty index, in a complementary list of poverty indicators, would weave the failure to achieve basic and vital human functionings like education, health, housing, employment into the mainstream lexicon of poverty. Poverty is widely recognised as multidimensional in policy rhetoric. Yet most government reports and poverty analysis place deprivations in these basic human functionings only second to monetary conceptions of poverty – malnutrition, illiteracy, no access to sanitation, housing or employment are usually a part of an adjunctive “social indicators” list on most policy documents. I recognise that the classification of these gross deprivations as social indicators has drawn attention to how they can be addressed through redistributive public policies but I also firmly believe that wedding them into the taxonomy of ‘poverty’ is going to be significant. The official inclusion of nonmonetary poverty

measures by the Bank has the capacity to reinforce the parity between monetary and nonmonetary deprivations – that both deserve comparable determined and concerted responses. It will also naturally bring into view structures and institutions alongside policy interventions when addressing basic human deprivations.

The second point I want make is in relation to some key dimensions missing from the nonmonetary measure the Bank is set to adopt. Of the dimensions recommended by the commission for the nonmonetary poverty measure, three – nutrition, personal security and employment – are not being incorporated at the moment due to data constraints. Indeed data on these dimensions are rarely included in consumption or income poverty surveys. However, I sincerely hope that nutrition, security and employment data will be top on the list of survey modules to be developed, that surveys including these deprivations alongside health, education and living standards will shortly appear, and that they will be included in poverty measures sooner than later. The expansion of concepts and methods of poverty measurement at the Bank will hopefully serve as a fresh nudge for data revolution at the national and sub-national levels of various countries. In a context, like that of India, where 40 per cent children under the age of 3 were found to be underweight in 2005-06, a gap of over ten years for the next round of nationally representative official surveys on nutrition is, to say the least, problematic. By no means do I underestimate the demands of rigorous data collection and I do recognise the rather long tradition of rich data gathered and made available for research by the government of India. However, the effort for more frequent and systematic data

collection on nutrition, work and physical safety cannot possibly be over-emphasised. I hope the urgency to monitor poverty globally on a more frequent basis and comprehensively is heightened through this effort.

As a user of poverty statistics, I wholeheartedly welcome the recommendations of the report, the endeavour of the Bank to have commissioned it in the first place and the acceptance of many of the recommendations. Measurement is the first vital step in tackling poverty and inequality. As challenging as it is, I am invigorated by Sir Tony's belief that "collectively we are not helpless".