

On pauperism in present and past

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Abstrak

Pauperism and pauperization are widespread phenomena in India both in present and past. While a fierce debate continues on how to draw the line separating the poor from the non-poor, there is hardly any discussion on the huge mass, not less than one-fifth of the population, living in destitution. Rural and urban case studies conducted in the state of Gujarat highlight the ordeal of these paupers: the non-labouring poor who never had or have lost their ability to take care of themselves; the footloose labour driven away from the village for lack of work but also driven back home again when they are thrown out of their casual employment; and, finally, an urban underclass redundant to demand, experienced by the better-off as a nuisance and brutally evicted from their slum habitat. A deeply ingrained mindset of social inequality propped up by an economic doctrine which puts a premium on those who have capital and victimizes those without the means required for bare survival. The book is set in a comparative frame that relates today's politics and policies in India to the past condition of the ultra-poor in Victorian England. Rather than generating steady and decently paid jobs, which would redeem the misery of the down and out, the mood of the upper classes resembles the spirit of social Darwinism during the latter half of the 19th century in the global North, when this transition to an urban-industrial future first took place. A residuum identified as the undeserving poor, existed then and was said to be unable as well as unwilling to participate in the trajectory of generalized welfare and progress. The author claims that this ideology of discrimination and exclusion is back with a vengeance the world over and not the least in India.