

"I think we need to be more humble and recognise that we don't know what the solutions are" – Professor Anirudh Krishna



Preceding a workshop organised by the LSE South Asia Centre to discuss the findings of his new book [The Broken Ladder: The Paradox and the Potential of India's One Billion](#) with students and faculty, **Professor Anirudh Krishna** spoke with **Rebecca Bowers** about the growing need to address India's inequality by implementing ground-level solutions.

RB: How would you say that [Broken Ladder](#) builds on your extensive research of poverty and its alleviation in India?

AK: I'd say that broken ladder pulls together threads from different bodies of research I've done in the past and I'm continuing to do and takes the argument further. In previous work I've looked at how people move out of poverty and how people move into poverty and how the net effect is the result of these two different vectors – the upward pulling vector and the downward pushing vector – and these vectors respond to different factors. So there's one set of events and factors that pull people out of poverty and a different set of events and factors that push people into poverty.

What I find in India is that for the ordinary individual, particularly an individual living in a rural area, which is still around seventy percent of the population, or living in an urban slum which is fifty percent of the rest, the downward pulls are fiercer, more frequent, and harder to counter than the upward pulling influences in their lives. This is partly a long term failure of provision of policy, partly a result of attitudes elites have to poorer people... 'you're poor because it's your own fault', regardless of the empirical facts. A lot of people believe people are poor because people are lazy or because they work less or they're low caste, or they're women and therefore it's their rightful place to be poor. So policy, attitudes, but most of all the failure to build institutions that enable people to gain larger benefits and to proceed along avenues that are more promising and more bountiful.

You've said there can be a fine line between falling into and escaping poverty. With this in mind, how can the Indian government improve its current initiatives of poverty alleviation, but also how can it promote sustainable, meaningful upward mobility?

There's a great deal that the government is doing already, and a great deal more that it can do. But, governance should be seen more appropriately as one of the different actors that are important here. There are also NGOs, there are also private sector, for-profit and non-profit enterprises which are increasingly entering the fray and doing salutary work in some cases – many cases, in fact.

What I think needs to be done which is not being done is a pooling of ideas, these efforts, and the creation of a longer term vision beyond the term of any elected government. In some sense it will require taking the agenda into the public sphere rather than kicking it into the government sphere and the public sphere is larger than the government sphere. A lot of people, not just I, have emphasised and outlined the problems that exist, but almost invariably there has been a rush toward top down solutions – how can we do something that solves the problem at the push of the button for the entire nation? That kind of large scale push-button magic solution thinking is the bane of government policy in India and in other countries, too.

I think we need to be more humble and recognise that we don't know what the solutions are and that truly is the case – we don't know what the solutions are and I'll give you an example in a moment. What we do know is that there is need to search for solutions, the context, the circumstances being faced in today's developing countries are very different from the circumstances and contexts faced by today's richer countries when they were poorer fifty to one hundred years ago. So, taking lessons from bygone economic history and using them as guides for today's problems is a very partial solution. Countries have to innovate their own solutions and innovation means incurring mistakes and learning from mistakes and it's incredibly stupid to do your innovation at a national level because it means you fail nationally and incur huge losses of taxpayer money.

Much better to take a leaf from the playbook of the Chinese government, who when they were trying to reform or reintroduce their rural healthcare system which had collapsed after the capitalist reforms. China took the long view, they asked people for ideas, they selected the best five or six ideas, they gave those people who had them a small pot of money and said 'you go to that two or three village group over there, implement your solution with this money and we are following you to see how it works' and they monitored it closely, evaluated it closely and at the end of the three years, picked the best three or four solutions, gave their innovators a bigger pot of money and said 'now you show us what you can do in a larger group of villages' and in this innovative process over a period of fifteen years, they have developed three alternative solutions which each province is asked to come up and pick from, and each of these solutions works.

It's not necessary that there be a uniform national solution. A menu of workable alternatives has been developed. None of them thrust from the top down, each proven in its own way, each refined through successive rounds of ground testing. Now that's the much cleverer and more permanent way of finding solutions rather than throwing things at the wall and hoping they will stick. But that's what a lot of governments, not just developing country governments, and not just India are doing, because the soft underbelly of a democracy is the urgency that a policymaker faces to produce policies that have an immediate impact, which can produce electoral benefits. Now, I'm not saying throw democracy away, I'm just saying that things which have such huge significance for society should only be partly under the control of the government even if they require tax money to spend.



Professor Anirudh Krishna presents his findings at the workshop. Photo credit: Mahima A Jain, LSE South Asia Centre.

In that way it shouldn't just be for the poor in exchange for votes, it should just be beneficial without strings attached.

The states in India coming up for election are giving away all sorts of crazy handouts and all of this is being done in the name of the poor and the name of poverty reduction! Giving somebody a tablet computer or giving somebody a refrigerator makes absolutely no impact on their long term poverty status. It's so much better to improve the quality of education in the schools that poor kids go to but that's not a push-button solution. That requires careful, grinding hard work which people have been doing. The point is that all of those efforts are small scale. Therefore, invisible on the radars of policy makers because they are such small blips, but those are the examples we should learn from because they have initiated and they have improved processes. They have created rules and institutions which help sustain a solution and help deal with newer problems as they come up. Because one thing I say in my book, and perhaps I say it too many times, is that the problems of development aren't ever solved. Each solution creates a new problem or reveals new opportunities, and what you're really thinking of is dynamic processes of problem solving that pick up on the new problem as it comes up and can handle it in real time rather than picking it up at the higher level and waiting for the solution to come down from the higher level. I'll give you an example...

So, to begin with there were no schools in rural areas, so the solution was to build schools, but when you build schools teachers weren't willing to go into such far flung areas, so the nature of the problem changed. When that problem was solved and teachers went to rural areas they didn't really teach intelligently or effectively because the quality of education was really low. Teachers are demotivated. So the nature of the problem has changed each time the problem has been solved. Now who is going to solve those problems? Does it need to be a centralised solution each time? There need to be institutions at the grassroots level that can bring the collective force of parents, teachers, students, other area residents into play and put their heads together and figure out how do deal with that problem, That's how we solve problems in everyday life... in families, in neighbourhoods. Why is that approach not being part of this whole battery of problem solving in the development sphere?



Young girls carry pots of water in Shoba Mahar, a small Indian village. The rural-urban divide, is a growing issue, Krishna states. Photo credit: [Balazs Gardi, Flickr, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](#).

Your research has taken you to various places in South America, Africa, the US where you are based. In what ways are these contexts of local poverty relatable to wider local patterns? What can we learn from other countries like China? I mean, maybe it isn't scalable but how is the local something, as anthropologists, economists, policy makers... we can utilise?

Well I think we all have to learn from individual examples because ultimately it's what's happening to the individual that adds up collectively to what's happening to the nation and there's lots of things that come across in a large swathe of countries that group collectively under the clumsy phrase 'largely agrarian developing countries which have large rural populations' which includes China, which is not majority rural any more but it's still forty to forty-five percent more than a billion people are rural. And the rural-urban divide is becoming pretty large. It was large to start with, it's becoming larger. That's because of a number of structural and classist factors in play that are common across countries. First, all of these countries have signed on to the project of globalisation-led economic growth, which necessarily and immediately privileges cities, particularly the bigger cities because these are nodes where globalisation enters a country, its effects immediately are felt there.

But the other thing that is happening simultaneously is the use of advanced technology in manufacturing and services operations and that's not confined only to labour short countries, to capital surplus and labour short countries. Global value chains are spreading the same technological effects, the same automation, robotization in manufacturing to new investments that are made even in developing countries which are labour surplus. So the fact that the endowments of a country are no longer important in the choice of technologies harks back to Amartya Sen's work of decades ago. The historic pathway that poorer rural people had in countries like Britain or the United States or Germany or even Japan or Korea, that large numbers of semi-educated, high school educated people were pulled off farms and into factories where they could work assembly lines and because they had unionised jobs, there was security assurance, there was this creation of an urban middle class that was upwardly mobile. Now, assembly lines have gone, the employment per unit of capital invested in new factories in developing countries has plummeted, the largest growth in the share of employment has been in the informal sector which means that you don't have a written contract, you don't have a steady job, you don't have old age security, you rarely have any healthcare benefits so you continue to remain vulnerable to all of the risks of life while just about making a living and those circumstances are shared across countries which collectively account for more than half the people on the planet and no viable solutions are in sight. I think there is scope for great study here.

Broken Ladder takes one step by looking at one country at one period of time, but there's a great need for doing a lot of research in other countries that can accumulate into a body of knowledge that policy makers can use. There's no gainsay in the fact that formal employment will not expand fast enough to absorb more than a tiny fraction of people in each of these countries. So they are going to be informally employed but then for example, why aren't people thinking about progressively formalising the conditions of employment in the informal sector? Why is there no push toward providing old age security towards these people? Are they just going to be used up and spat out until they can be used no more? Where's the thinking about providing that, providing health care benefits, even if you're not going to give everybody a unionised job, and I'm not arguing for that, there has to be flexibility of employment in this age of fierce global competition, but look at how people in Europe have treated the same phenomena of flexible labour and short term labour and part time labour, they do get some kinds of old age and health benefits, even though they are working irregular jobs. Why is that thinking not carrying over into other countries? And I'm not saying the state should provide for everybody or that the employer should provide for everybody in every case, but there needs to be some thinking about how to solve this problem.

Second, since large numbers of people work in agriculture, where is the investment thrust in agriculture happening? There is this underlining assumption that very soon they'll all be urban, just like the United States where only two percent of people are in agriculture, very soon we'll all be the United States, but that's not going to happen. That's not going to happen in my life time or my kid's lifetime or my grandkid's lifetime, and we know this, if we just look at the shift from rural to urban we find that the rate of population growth in rural outpaces the net of out migration. Many of those who go out to urban jobs keep a foot in the rural area

Very much.

Because the kinds of urban jobs they get are not as secure as to take their families to the city. Many of them have no place to stay. You've seen those people. And this is happening in China too, so where is there a parallel investment to improve production and raise productivity and introduce alternative employment avenues in rural areas? Perhaps in China but not in many other countries.

You can read the *Broken Ladder* workshop report [here](#).

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About the Authors



Anirudh Krishna is a Professor of Public Policy and Political Science at Duke University. Prior to completing his PhD at Cornell University, he worked in the Indian Administrative Service for fourteen years, managing rural and urban development initiatives. Professor Krishna has published numerous research articles and book chapters. His latest book, *The Broken Ladder: The Paradox and the Potential of India's One Billion*, explores why, despite considerable economic growth, upward mobility remains elusive for so many in India, as well as potential solutions for this.



Rebecca Bowers is blog editor at the LSE South Asia Centre and a final year PhD student in the Anthropology Department at the London School of Economics. Rebecca's research explores the lives of female construction workers and their families in Bengaluru, India.