

## **Death by Dignity for the Lower Middle Class COVID 19 and the Neo Poor**

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*The poor all over India are getting free rations and Rs. 500 from the Government- Migrant workers are finding sympathy and support through governments and NGOs- The totally neglected group today are the lower middle classes.*

**1990 AD:** A rickshaw puller or daily wage earner would make twenty rupees a day grossing about six hundred rupees a month. Their wives, working for daily wages or as house help would get one hundred to three hundred rupees: Family earning between six hundred to nine hundred a month. They considered themselves to be poor, society looked at them as poor and they were indeed the poor of the society.

Around the same time, typists, salespersons, receptionists and supervisors of all types would make between thousand to fifteen hundred rupees and considered themselves to be middle class. The rich and the real middle classes perceived them as lower middle class, and they were certainly not the poor of the times.

**2020 AD:** Rickshaw pullers have become auto drivers and along with the daily wage earners make at least ten thousand a month. Their wives working as part time maids or on daily wage make another six to eight thousand. Some of them also send their children to work who contribute another five to eight thousand to the family kitty. So today, the average income of a family whom society considers to be poor could be between fifteen thousand to thirty thousand per month.

Cut to the booming service sector that has emerged in the past three decades in retail sector, healthcare, teaching, hospitality and travel comprising of salespersons, receptionists and office assistants etc. whose average take home would be eight thousand to fifteen thousand. Many of their wives do not do a job and even those who do would be working as teachers, receptionists, sales persons etc. earning between five to fifteen thousand per month. The income of these families would be between eight to thirty thousand averaging about fifteen thousand.

So, in the present world, whom we consider to be socially poor are no longer economically poor and those who have really become economically poor are still treated as lower middle class by all and they also consider themselves to be middle class. **This group is the Neo Poor.**

Most schemes and programs of the government and NGOs are focused on the socially poor with hardly any support for the Neo Poor. The socially poor are given the Priority Ration Cards that entitles them to subsidized or free rations and the Neo Poor do not get this facility even when their purchasing power is less.

### **In Times of Coronavirus Lockdown**

The government announced that ration card holders (meaning the socially poor) will be given free rations along with some cash and some states supplemented it further. Even NGOs are providing for them. The migrant workers also came into sharp focus this time and as many of them have rations cards in their native places, their families will not starve with the

announcement of free rations by the government and those in Telangana will be taken care of as the State Government has started providing them rations only on the basis of the Aadhar Card.

So, the only section left really high and dry are the Neo Poor- our teachers of private schools, office assistants, salespersons, field officers, receptionists and supervisors of all types.

**Teachers as Case Study:** As per government data, there were 65,66,687 private teachers in India in 2015-16. With Lockdown, most students will not pay the fees and a majority of these teachers will not get their salaries from the month of March till the schools reopen in June. An average private school teacher earns between 5 thousand to 15 thousand a month and their survival for the next 3 months without salary, priority ration cards or support from any NGO or philanthropist will be a miracle.

Others from the Neo Poor will have similar stories. CMIE data shows that 5 crore people have lost their jobs in just two weeks of the lockdown and many of them will be from the Neo Poor. With an average monthly income of around fifteen thousand rupees and the pressures to present a middle-class façade, they will hardly have any saving. Others will not think of supporting them and even if some do, they will hesitate to make an offer of support out of fear of hurting their dignity.

As the Neo Poor is dignity personified, they also cannot extend their hand to seek support and so will have to slowly starve themselves to death-but without any signs and silently.

In this scenario, governments also cannot be of much help with their resources stretched to breaking point. So, it will be left to the middle classes and the rich to seek out and adopt one or more Neo Poor families and extend support discreetly.

**The Challenge:** Mechanisms exist to provide for the socially poor but no such arrangement is available to reach out to the Neo Poor. The immediate task is to craft appropriate systems to provide the basic subsistence support to the Neo Poor even while protecting their identity and honouring their dignity.

For a start, we could begin with providing at least Rs. 5000 or more if possible, as basic sustenance support to our cousins and relatives in need, then to our service providers like computer repair persons, beauticians, owners of non-essential products shops in our neighborhood that are shut, teachers of private schools and so one. Only if each one who can take care of 2 to 20 families, the Neo Poor will be able survive this nightmare.

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