

# The Ups and Downs of the Poverty Line

Mudrarakshas

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These days Mathuradas is somewhat perplexed. He was looking for the Poverty Line. The season of election campaigning had arrived. In this election the Poverty Line was extremely important. During past elections gutters would be cleaned out and a few streets built. The first and last time an electric light was installed in Mathuradas's neighbourhood was during an election. Sometimes wells would be dug or bridges built. The present election, however, is more complicated. Building a bridge won't work. The prerequisite for this election is to take those people who are below the Poverty Line and raise them above it. Mathuradas himself wanted to run for a seat this time. So, perplexed, he went to the Party's Headquarters.

What he did not know was that if he wanted to win an election, then, before going to the Party's Headquarters, he needed to slip quickly below the Poverty Line. Near Mathuradas's neighbourhood is a small village. There the Headman's brother was the first to slip below the Poverty Line. Then Sugancand joined him, who has forty hectares of sugarcane, followed by Motusah Halwayi and Lendenram Arhtiya. The Headman then notified a high Government Official, a Hakim, that the poor of the village were now ready for him to lift them above the Poverty Line.

In the village the drum was sounded and this official announcement was made: "Brothers! Brothers living below the Poverty Line! The Government will take away your poverty! All of you living below the Poverty Line are to gather at the village meeting place!"

The poor gathered at the village meeting place, but they only numbered six. The Government Official was let down. Said he, " I was supposed to take away the poverty of a hundred people in this village!"

How can I do my job with only six?" His Assistant said, "No, huzoor, your orders were to rid two hundred of their poverty."

The Official scolded his Assistant. He had taken away the poverty of a hundred even before coming here. He had had his wife put separate fingerprints on a hundred applications, thus taking away the poverty of his son-in-law. With the money he got from those applications, he had a car given to him. Up until then the poor thing had had to make do with a motor scooter.

Now, though, there were only six in the village, not a hundred.

The Headman reassured him. "Don't worry, huzoor. I have it all planned out. Yes, there are only six people, but there are a hundred applications."

The Government Official explained. "But the villagers themselves must agree that these people are in fact below the Poverty Line and should get the loan money. They have to raise their hands in support of what we are doing."

The Headman's servant immediately came forward and said, "Don't worry, huzoor. That, too, has already been taken care of. We sent around one of our best goons. Everyone was on side. They'll raise their hands."

The Government Official was a little angry. "It's against the law to get support at the point of a gun."

The Headman then gently broke in and said, "Huzoor, there is no reason for you to be displeased. Certainly we used our pistols, but only to make the announcement that no disorderliness would be tolerated on this Blessed Occasion. You see for yourself how peacefully everything is proceeding."

Satisfied with that, the Government Official proclaimed, "Let the villagers listen. The Government has decided to give aid to the poorest people in the village. Let those who are the poorest step forward."

The six chosen to be poor by the Headman stepped forward. The Hakim had them counted. The person counting was shocked. The Headman had selected six, but seven men were standing there.

The Headman fumed, "Who's the seventh wretch who's come here?" No one wanted to say. The Headman was on the verge of losing it. "I specifically selected six poor people! How did this mess happen?"

After some investigation it was learned that Ghurhoo, who did odd jobs for the Headman but received no pay, was the one who had joined in with the six selected poor. He had no shack to live in or any source of

food. He ate whatever he could get. He slept wherever he could find a spot. When he heard the announcement, he joined in. The Headman and the Moneylender frowned at him, and the Police Constable immediately yanked him away.

How easily did the Constable raise Ghurhoo above the Poverty Line! The Hakim asked Ghurhoo, "What's going on here? Who are you?"

Putting his hands together, Ghurhoo said, "I'm very poor, sir. My name's Ghurhoo. I do forced labour."

"That's a lie!" hollered the Headman's goon. "He's not poor. He's just getting some kicks."

Ghurhoo stammered, "No, huzoor, I'm very poor."

The Hakim announced, "This won't be solved this way. We'll have to have all the villagers raise their hands on the issue of whether or not Ghurhoo is poor."

"Good idea," said the Headman, and to his goons he said, "Have everybody raise their hands that Ghurhoo isn't poor, he's rich. And be sure you don't show your pistols to anyone. Everything should go according to their own wishes."

The goons fanned out in all directions. Then they announced, "Let the villagers understand that no funny business will be tolerated. Tell me, is Ghurhoo poor or not?"

The people looked briefly toward the goons and said in one voice, "No, Ghurhoo isn't poor, he's rich."

Ghurhoo began weeping. He said to the Hakim, "Huzoor, these people are lying. They say I'm rich because they're afraid of the goons."

Then the Headman intervened and said, "Huzoor, he's from the Opposition. Trouble-maker. The goons were sent out only to maintain order and to prevent any untoward pressure on the people as they made their decision."

The Hakim was satisfied. The Constable not only pulled Ghurhoo out of Poverty, he kicked him out of the village, too. Then, to the chants of *jay jay*, the program to raise the village's poor above the Poverty Line was successfully completed, and in front of all, the poverty of the poor, from Nahar Singh, the Headman's brother, to Sugancand and Lendenram, was taken away.

With the money they received, they bought carbines, with which they carried out robberies here and there and began living happier days.

Such poor people become very useful during elections. Their carbines

prove to be Ram's arrows. They keep some voters at home and make sure others make it to the voting booth. If that doesn't work, if the Opposition Parties prove to be too clever in getting their people out to vote, then these same poor people compassionately take it upon themselves to guarantee the security of the ballot boxes at the polling stations. Victory is assured.

Mathuradas dashed off the above report and began looking for Hari Shankar Parsai, but Parsai ji, meanwhile, was quite busy. He had to go many places to receive prizes. So Mathuradas kept bumbling around. He's in complete agreement with Parsai ji that if there's any corruption in the country, it's the writers who are corrupt. The Government is just fine. Furthermore, whenever there is any mess or confusion, it's up to the people themselves to realize their own responsibility. They have no right to drag the Government into it.

As soon as he has received it from Hari Shankar Parsai, Mathuradas will send out the errata page.