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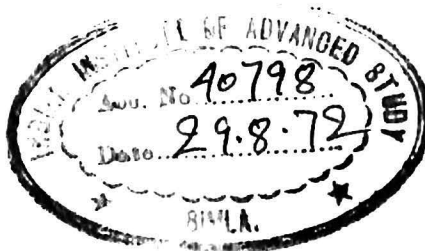
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**THE INCOME DISTRIBUTION EFFECT ON THE PRICE
LEVEL OF ESSENTIALS**

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SUMMARY

Of the many factors influencing the price level in a developing economy, changes in income distribution have been selected for closer analysis in this paper. In a simple model of an economy, some basic assumptions are used to construct individual demand curves as a function of the price level and disposable income. Aggregate demand is then calculated for various patterns of income distribution. Under certain relatively plausible assumptions, the effect of changes in income distribution on the price level and on the critical minimum supply quantity of the essential commodity is examined. For both, a tendency to increase during the course of development as a result of income distribution effects is tentatively posited.

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Economic development is frequently accompanied by a rise in the level of prices. This a fact of experience, both in countries already enjoying prosperity as well as in those at the beginning of the road to progress. The reasons for this phenomenon are manifold, and some of them will be taken up in detail elsewhere. In this paper we will confine ourselves to one of them only. Our contention is basically this : Development programmes do not affect all sections of the population simultaneously and evenly, and spread effects are slow. The pattern of income distribution changes in favour of a new middle class of income earners, and this change in itself affects the price level of essential commodities. We intend to show with the aid of a very simple model, the direction of the income distribution effect on the price level of essential commodities and work out some of the implications for economic policy measures. Unfortunately, at the present stage of our research, we must limit ourselves here primarily to a theoretical exposition, but it is hoped that the

*This paper has been written during my stay at the Gandhian Institute of Studies, Varanasi. I am grateful for all the discussions I had there that inspired me to write it. I am also grateful to Mysore University, where I was able to stay for several weeks and where the present draft was finalised.

assumptions made are plausible enough to warrant empirical research into the income distribution effect at some later stage.

With regard to income distribution in India, statistics are very scanty, and often data for different points of time are incomparable.¹ While it has not yet been possible to sift all the evidence available, the trend one would expect to emerge during the course of development is fairly clear. Here is what the Planning Commission has to say on the subject : "Before the process of economic development gathers momentum, the larger part of inequalities arise from the long established features of a traditional society, such as feudal rights and tenures, or privileges and handicaps associated with the social structure."² In what is to follow we will term this stage a *feudal* economy and characterise it by a distribution pattern in which there is a very small rich class and a mass of relatively poor individuals.

An important aspect of the problem of income disparities concerns the gap between rural and non-rural incomes which, according to the Planning Commission, "tends to widen under the impact of industrial and economic development."³ This phenomenon of *dualism* seems to be common to many developing countries in the early stages of development. There is a tendency for differences in levels of earned income to become even larger than before. This is due to a variety of circumstances, of which "the relative scarcity of trained personnel, lack of social mobility, and the presence of inflationary influences" are mentioned by the Planning Commission.⁴ Indeed, Benjamin Higgins goes so far as to say that in fact there are hardly any underdeveloped countries. "There are under-developed regions, and an under-developed country is one in which the under-developed regions comprise a large proportion of the total economy"⁵.

As development proceeds and employment opportunities increase, one can expect a greater proportion of the labour force to be absorbed into the developing sector. Income levels may now tend to spread along

1. The National Council of Applied Economic Research has been extremely helpful in pinpointing such data as are available. Gratitude is also due to my colleague, Sri L. M. Chandola, who has helped in locating additional sources of income distribution data. It is hoped to examine this material more closely in the near future.
2. Government of India, Planning Commission, *Third Five-Year Plan*, p.16.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
5. Higgins, B., *Einige Bemerkungen zur Regional planung*, in : Kruse-Rodenacker, A., Ed., *Grundfragen der Entwicklungsplanug*, Berlin 1964, p. 17.

a continuum instead of being concentrated at two more or less distinct levels as in a dualistic situation. We will call this phenomenon of "pluralism" a *developing* economy and characterise it by an equal statistical distribution over range of income levels.

Finally, in *developed* countries the differences in levels of earned income "have now been greatly reduced"⁶ and one can expect similar tendencies to assert themselves in developing countries once the development effort has had a significant measure of success. However, one should not ignore the fact that even in some of the most advanced countries pockets of poverty persist in the midst of plenty, and we will consequently take this into account in what follows.

This account will admittedly require substantial modification in the light of statistical evidence and we must not be misinterpreted as positing a theory of stages of economic development in terms of income distribution patterns. What we intend to show is that, given a series of income distribution patterns successively characterising feudal, dual, developing and developed economies, specific effects on the price level of essential commodities can be shown that may require economic policy measures to supplement the market mechanism during the process of economic development.

THE MODEL

We will now turn to the model and start by describing it and the variables to be considered. We have a society of individuals who, in their basic physiological and psychological characteristics are identical. They require a single commodity (the "essential" commodity) for subsistence in a minimum quantity s per capita and period, the assumption being that if s is not provided to an individual i ($i = 1, 2, \dots, n$) in any one period, he will not survive to see the next. The economy has a market system for distributing the essential commodity. The price p in any one period being simultaneously determined by the total availability C of the essential commodity and the schedule of aggregate demand. Whereas the supply C of the essential commodity per period is exogenously given in our model, aggregate demand for the commodity at a given price is determined by the sum of individual demand quantities q_i . The individual demand pattern is assumed to be identical for each individual i , being dependent on two variables: the price p of the commodity and the income a_i of the individual i . If the essential commodity were a free good, i.e. available in such large quantities that $p = 0$, the demand

6. Government of India, Planning Commission, *Third Five-Year Plan*, p. 16.

would be limited at some saturation point at which the marginal utility of the commodity becomes zero. This saturation point is once more identical for all individuals and is independent of any other variables in the system. It is, therefore, possible to divide the individual quantity demanded at a given price p_o into two components : one constituting the subsistence amount s needed for survival—the essential demand—and one which we will term, perhaps rather arbitrarily, “luxury demand”, l_i . For $p = 0$, l_i takes on a given level b determined by the saturation point.

Moreover, we can express the essential demand quantity s as a fraction of b (luxury demand at saturation point). For the sake of argument, let us take as an example $s = 0.2b$. This means that the quantity of the essential commodity demanded by an individual when its price is zero (saturation) is six times the amount of that commodity required for subsistence. To simplify matters still further, let us assume that our society consist of only five individuals, i.e. $n = 5$, amongst whom the disposable income is distributed⁷.

Our model now consists of the following equations and definitions :

- (1) $Q = \sum_{i=1}^n q_i$ Q — Aggregate demand
- (2) $n = 5$ (as example) n — Population
- (3) $q_i = s + l_i$ q_i — individual demand
- (4) $l_i = b(1 - p^2 a_i^{-2})^{0.5}$ l_i — individual luxury demand
- (5) $b = 1$ (by assumption) b — Value of l_i at saturation point
- (6) $s = 0.2b$ (by assumption) s — individual subsistence quantity
- (7) $A = \sum_{i=1}^n a_i$ A — National Income (disposable)
- (8) $A = 1$ (by assumption of proper unit) a_i — individual income (disposable)
 p — Price of the essential commodity.

7. In an empirical test of the model it may be convenient to divide the total population into a number of income groups. n could then easily be interpreted as the number of such groups chosen, the average per capita income within the group then being taken to represent the per capita income of each individual of that group. In this case the number of individuals per group has to be introduced as a factor before each individual demand function q_i . No great problems are involved in principle.

Therefore,

$$Q = ns + b \sum_{i=1}^n (1 - p^2 a_i^{-2})^{.5} = 1 + \sum_{i=1}^n (1 - p^2 a_i^{-2})^{.5}$$

Some Examples

Now, there are obviously a large number of ways in which A can be distributed amongst the n individuals of our society, and unfortunately this set of distributions cannot be ordered on a linear scale. In other words, we cannot express income distribution by single variable. A particular distribution over a population of n individuals can only be defined by a list of n variables, i.e. by a vector in n -dimensional space.⁸ Thus the set of all possible income distributions in our example is equivalent to the set of points on a bounded hyperplane in 5-dimensional space. We must, therefore, content ourselves with comparing the aggregate demand quantities pertaining to a number of selected distribution patterns that appear to be characteristic of historical situations. For this purpose we will choose patterns that might be characteristic—at least in a symbolic way—for those likely to be encountered during the course of development as discussed earlier.

In order that each individual may get the subsistence quantity, the l_1 part of individual demand should not be less than zero. Hence, so long as any individual has an income 0.1, the maximum permissible price (let us call it critical price, p_c) is given by

$$1 - p^2/(0.1)^2 = 0$$

Therefore,

$$p_c = 0.1.$$

If the minimum income of any individual is a_{min} , then the critical price will also be a_{min} .

In our examples we assume five different income distributions (*vide* Table 1) and given the critical price in each case we can calculate the minimum supply of consumption goods needed at the critical price from the formula—

$$Q = ns + \sum_{i=1}^n (1 - p^2 a_i^{-2})^{0.5}$$

or, by

$$Q = q_1 + q_2 + q_3 + q_4 + q_5 \text{ (in case } n = 5)$$

8. Strictly speaking, $n-1$ variables would suffice for describing a distribution among n elements, as long as the total to be distributed is known, because the distribution to the n -th element is a residual. However, to work with n variables is more convenient. In any case, n dimensions are necessary if the total to be distributed is included in the list of information necessary to define the distribution.

Thus if the incomes are 0.1, 0.1, 0.1, 0.1 and 0.6 time b , then

$$Q = 0.2 + 0.2 + 0.2 + 0.2 + 0.2 + (1 - .1^2/.6^2)^{0.5}$$

$$= 1 + 1 - (0.5)(.1/.6) \text{ approximately}$$

or 1.986 approx.

This value may be called the 'critical minimum supply' and indicated by C_c . In table 1 we have presented C_c for each of five types of distributions. The interesting conclusion that follows is that as we go to the developed state the critical minimum quantity needed goes on increasing, provided the crucial price can be maintained in the face of the market mechanism. But if the price cannot be held down, or if the supply cannot be increased to the critical minimum, C_c , then our examples demonstrate the disadvantage of exclusive reliance on the market mechanism, in cases where poverty exists amidst plenty.

Let us, therefore, examine the effect of releasing the assumption of a pure market system and supplementing it with some other distributive mechanism. Assume that the essential demand of the low income individual is satisfied before the commodity is released to the market. Then the supply quantity appearing on the market is the total amount available minus the poor individual's ration of 0.2. This will, of course increase the market price somewhat by decreasing market supply, but it is interesting to note that the critical supply quantity is now moved from its position at 4.5832 to 0.8 in the market. Add to this the requisitioned amount supplied to the poor individual and we find that our society is now able to cooperate with a total critical supply quantity of $C_c = 1$ only. Similarly, a system might be devised for providing every individual of society with the minimum quantity of the essential good necessary for his subsistence and to release any surplus for distribution by the market mechanism. However, in such a system, the costs of procuring and distributing would have to be taken into account in order to give a precise analysis. Alternatively, one could envisage the effects of a transfer of income to the low income individual on the critical supply quantity in the framework of our model.

Incidentally, in figures II to VI (*vide* Appendix) we show the curves of total demand at different prices for each of the five income distributions.

But, however interesting these insights might be, it is not our purpose to examine them here, so we will turn to another aspect.

Price Levels :

Till now we have been mainly concerned with the influence of differences or changes in income distribution on the supply quantity needed to afford subsistence to all sections of society through market mechanisms. Let us now assume a particular supply quantity of the essential good as given and examine how different income distribution patterns influence the price level at which the supply quantity will be sold in the market. For this purpose let us assume a quantity of the essential commodity available that is greater than the highest critical supply quantity C_c of the examples previously discussed, i.e. $C > C_c$ (max) or $C > 4.5832$. For the sake of convenience, let us select arbitrarily $c = 5$ as the supply quantity available.

Thus, in the aggregate demand function

$$Q = ns + b \sum_{i=1}^n (1 - p^2 a_i^{-2})^{0.5}$$

apart from n , s , b and q_i , Q is now also given and it remains to isolate p . In the case of equal distribution we have $a_i = 0.2$ for all i and consequently we can write :

$$5 = 5 \times 0.2 + 1 \times 5 (1 - p^2 \times 0.2^{-2})^{0.5}$$

or $p = 0.12.$

In the case of *two* income groups, e.g.

$$a_i = a_1 \text{ for all } i \leq k \text{ and}$$

$$a_i = a_{k+1} \text{ for all } i > k \text{ where } k \text{ is a constant with } 1 \leq k \leq 5,$$

the problem can be solved by substitution as follows : We have

$$Q = k (s + (1 - p^2 a_1^{-2})^{0.5}) + (5 - k) (s + (1 - p^2 a_{k+1}^{-2})^{0.5})$$

For $Q = 5$ and $s = 0.2$, and by substituting x and y as follows

$$(1 - p^2 a_1^{-2})^{0.5} = x, (1 - p^2 a_{k+1}^{-2})^{0.5} = y,$$

we get $5 = ks + (5 - k)s + kx + (5 - k)y$

or $x = \frac{4 - (5 - k)y}{k}$ and $y = \frac{4 - ky}{5 - k}$

By isolating p^2 in the substitutions above

we get $p^2 = a_1^2 (1 - x^2)$ and $p^2 = a_{k+1}^2 (1 - y^2)$,

or $a_1^2 (1 - x^2) - a_{k+1}^2 (1 - y^2) = 0$

This gives us two equations with two unknowns (x and y). After solving for x or y , p^2 and p can be easily calculated. This method is applicable to the two-class distribution patterns of the feudal ($k = 4$), dual ($k = 3$) and developed ($k = 1$) economies, the prices being 0.066, 0.073 and 0.093 respectively.

In the case of the developing economy, however, this procedure does not work. The present author must therefore rely on suggestions from elsewhere to provide a general solution. Here an iterative trial and error process was used and the price level under the given conditions was calculated to be 0.091.

Conclusions :

These results, together with those achieved in the preceding section, have been summarised in Table 1.

TABLE 1

Critical Supply C_c , Critical Price p_c and price of the essential commodity $p(5)$ for a given quantity of supply $C = 5$ for various income distributions.

Case	Distribution					C_c	p_c	$p(5)$
	a_1	a_2	a_3	a_4	a_5			
(a) Equal	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	1.000	0.2	0.120
(b) Feudal	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.6	1.986	0.1	0.066
(c) Dual	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.35	0.35	2.917	0.1	0.073
(d) Developing	0.1	0.15	0.2	0.25	0.30	4.471	0.1	0.091
(e) Developed	0.1	0.225	0.225	0.225	0.225	4.588	0.1	0.093

The relationship between distribution, critical supply quantity C_c and the price level $p(5)$ for a given quantity of supply $c = 5$ is shown in Fig. 1.

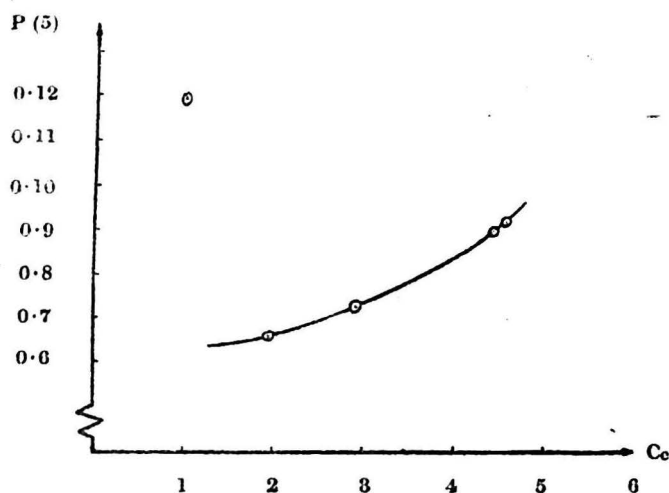


Fig 1 : Critical Supply and Price Level for a given Quantity of Supply as a Function of Income Distribution.

The positions, marked in this Figure, represent, *from left to right*, An Equal, Feudal, Dual, Developing and Developed, Distributions, respectively.

From the diagram as well as from the preceding table an interesting fact emerges. If the pattern of income distribution tends to change in the course of development from a feudal pattern to one of a developed economy as characterised in our model, then the price level of essential goods will tend to rise, quite apart from the effects of other factors. The magnitude of the price effect of income redistribution in the course of development will depend on the value of the physiological, psychological and social parameters involved, but it might well be that it is large enough to warrant greater attention in macro-economic analyses of the price level changes encountered during economic development than evident in the past.

It is particularly interesting to note that per capita availability of essential goods must necessarily increase in the course of development if the market mechanism is to remain the sole instrument for their distribution. The optimists who repeatedly, and perhaps somewhat too complacently point out that India's per capita food production in recent years has not declined, so that there is no real scarcity (whatever that may mean), seem to be oblivious of the fact that in the course of development luxury consumption of essentials tends to rise.

Our model also seems to explain the phenomenon that even in times of famine food is often readily available in the markets for those who have the purchasing power. If supply—perhaps due to natural causes—falls below the ever rising critical supply quantity, the market system must be supplemented by other distributive machinery, if starvation in the midst of (statistical) per capita sufficiency is to be avoided.

APPENDIX

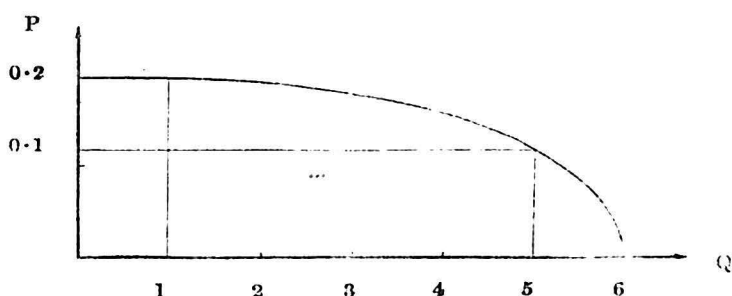


Fig. II Aggregate Demand as a Function of Price: Equal Distribution.

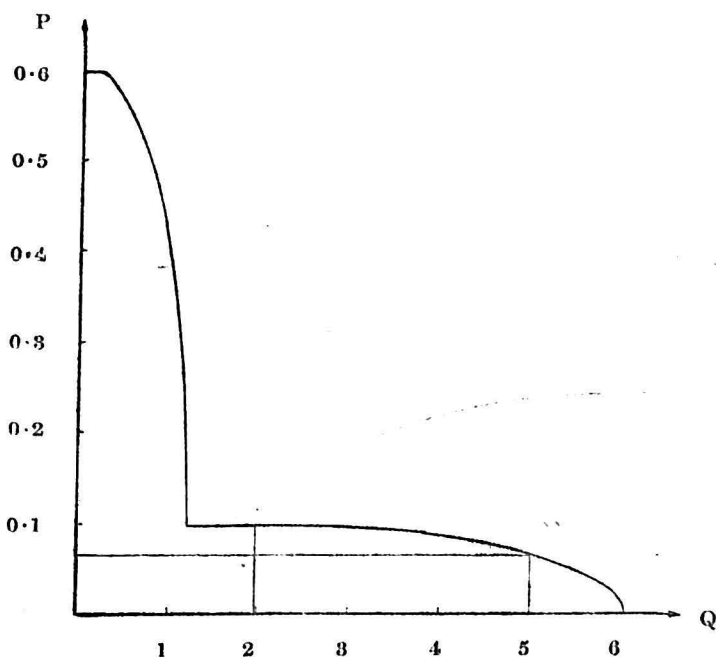


Fig. III: Aggregate Demand as a Function of Price: Feudal Distribution with very small rich class.

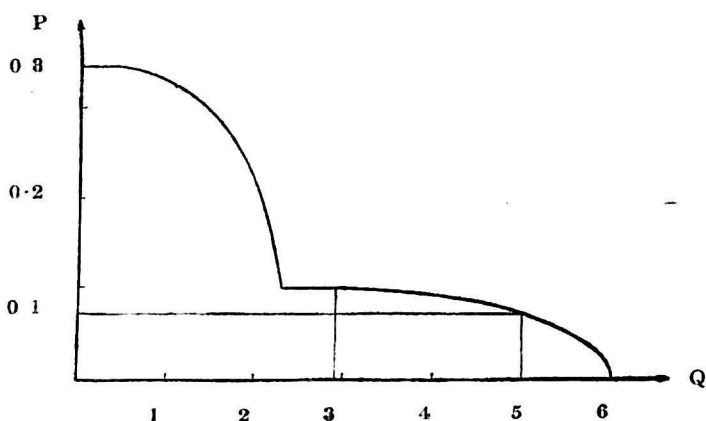


Fig. IV: Aggregate Demand as a Function of Price: Dual Distribution with traditional as also relatively developed urbanised sector.

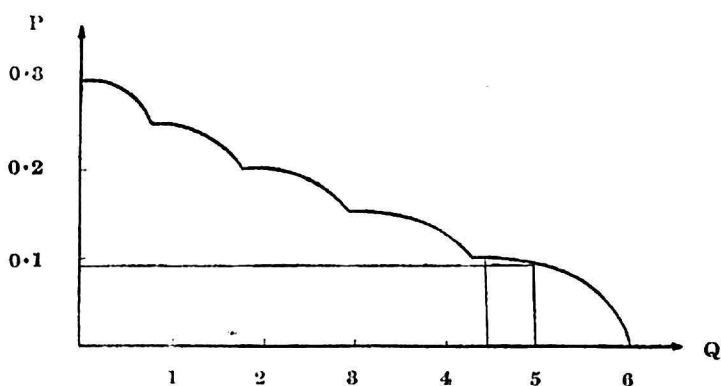


Fig. V: Aggregate Demand as a Function of Price: Developing Distribution with more differentiated income.

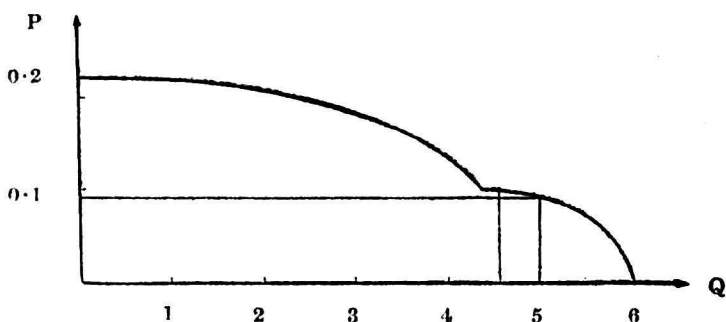


Fig. VI: Aggregate Demand as a Function of Price: Developed Distribution with poverty not completely banished inspite of government initiated transfers.

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