

POVERTY: A VAGUE AND VALUE ORIENTED CONCEPT

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The vicious circle of poverty is the most burning problem before the world. It is widespread and deep rooted in almost all developing nations and even in developed ones and the subject has been under discussion for the last seven decades (Encyclopaedia of Americans: 1966) Poverty has long ceased to be an issue relating to compassion alone. One out of every three people in India is officially poor. If you count those who are deprived of safe drinking water, adequate clothing or shelter, the number is considerably higher. If you also include people who are 'above' the officially defined poverty line but are vulnerable in the sense of not being adequately insured against rising prices, unemployment, illiteracy, declining income, old age and disease, you get a huge majority. In recent times, on the basis of more scientific investigation, various authorities have assessed the prevalence of poverty in Asian countries. A World Bank report predicts that most of the world's poor will reside in South Asia by 2020.

Poverty is a complex phenomenon. It manifests itself in a myriad of ways. The poor not only suffer from low income and high unemployment but also from low life expectancy, low levels of literacy and poor health. The status of women is even lower while rural poverty is more complex still, as it is reinforced by social factors. In a vast country like India, social and economic factors operate differently in different regions.

The general consensus is that the study of poverty attained pragmatic and relevant dimensions only within a relative framework. Gillin and Gillin (1965) define poverty as "That condition in which a person either because of inadequate income or unwise expenditure does not maintain a scale of living high enough to provide for his physical and mental efficiency and to enable him and his natural dependents to function usefully

according to the standards of the society of which he is a member". Thus, with a view to making the individual meaningful and functioning members of society, every society prescribes certain standards of living regarding minimum food, clothing, shelter, education and other amenities. Those who fall below these culturally prescribed standards, popularly known as the poverty line, are classified as poor. On the other hand, Prof. Amartya Sen (1980) says in his famous "Poverty and Famine" that "Poverty is nothing but lack of rights on commodities."

The poor happen to perpetuate poverty because of the socio-economic, socio-cultural and structural disabilities that continue to threaten their development. "People without productive assets, people with no resource base or no meaningful productive activity are those who are below the poverty line. They are the people deprived by squalor, hunger and disease. They are unorganized and have no bargaining power and are subject to growth deprivation and dependency. They are the people who are born in debt, live in debt and die in debt" (Romes, 1981). As such, the sting of poverty is not so much in the physical suffering that is inflicted as in the psychological resentment and frustration that unequal distribution of wealth generates (Punit 1982).

Broadly, there are two main approaches to the understanding of poverty – (i) the narrow economic definition and (ii) the broader 'cultural' perspective. Economically, poverty may be defined as an insufficiency of the material necessities of life. This is not a very exact definition because the necessities of one society may be luxuries in another and completely unknown in a third. The idea of insufficiency is likewise difficult to fix with precision. Some writers distinguish between poverty as the normal condition of the poorest stratum of a population and indigence or misery as the economic

helplessness of people who have no regular sources of income. Through the concept "culture of poverty", Lewis Oscar (1968) arrived at some conclusions like lack of resources, low wages, chronic unemployment and under employment which lead to low income, lack of property ownership, absence of savings, absence of food reserves in the home and a chronic shortage of cash, a high incidence of pawning personal goods, borrowing from local money lenders at usurious rates of interest, spontaneous informal credit devices organized by neighbours, the use of secondhand clothing and furniture and the pattern of frequent buying of small quantities of food many times a day as the need arises and selling household items immediately when one has some monetary crisis and, finally, child labour. Like segregation and discrimination, fear, suspicion or apathy and development of local solutions for problems, a low level of literacy and education, very little use of banks, hospitals etc are socio-psychological characteristics of poverty. Blum and Rosei (1944) discovered some personality traits among the poor in America. These traits are a strong feeling of marginality, hopelessness, dependence, inferiority, material deprivation, weak ego structure, confusion of sexual identification, lack of impulse control, strong present time orientation, lack of future planning, sense of resignation and fatalism, high tolerance of psychological pathology of all sorts and low aspirations are the key personality traits of these hopeless people.

Poverty has always had several not entirely separable meanings and is always defined according to the conventions of the society in which it occurs. For administrative reasons, the definition may also take the form of fixing an absolute criterion of poverty (e.g. a 'poverty line'). We may distinguish three meanings: (1) social poverty (2) pauperism and (3) moral poverty.

Social poverty implies not merely economic inequality but also social inequality, that is, a relation of inferiority, and dependence of exploitation. In other words, it implies the existence of a social stratum definable by, among other things, lack of wealth. In this

sense, poverty is relative, implying no particular level of income or amount of property, although in pre-industrial and underdeveloped economies, the level normally qualifying the individual (but not always the class) as 'poor' is one not far removed from subsistence.

Pauperism describes a category of people unable to maintain themselves at all or to maintain themselves at the level conventionally regarded as minimal without outside assistance. At any given time, this implies the fixing of a minimum standard below which men are not supposed to fall and often also implies a model of social relations that indicates which paupers have a claim upon public assistance and who is to assist them.

Moral poverty defines the place of poverty in the value system of a society or of its subgroups and institutions, that is, it defines whether poverty is morally acceptable and what status it confers or prevents the poor man from enjoying. It is therefore difficult to separate from social poverty and pauperism except where it finds expression in specific bodies of men in the past, normally religious bodies who voluntarily undergo poverty. In stratified societies, several values of poverty will normally co-exist, for example, it will be a 'shame' or a punishment or sin for some or cause of pride for others or even both at the same time.

Poverty, being a relative concept, is not confined to poor nations alone. It is as much a part of the opulent nations as it is of the needy ones. What is deemed poverty in an opulent country like America may be a far cry from what it is in a poor Asian/African nation. Indeed, a poor American with \$500 of income per week, may be looked up to with respect as a man of substance in a country like India whereas a middle-class Indian with an income of Rs 2000/- a month would be deemed to be no more than a pauper in America. Small wonder then that there is no universally applicable measure or yardstick to describe poverty.

Poverty, nonetheless, can be absolute. In that sense, it refers to a condition of acute

physical starvation, malnutrition, disease, want of clothing, want of shelter and almost total lack of medical care. Such absolute poverty, however, is essentially a phenomenon of the developing nations of Asia and Africa. Most of the developed countries of the west are now rid of those conditions. This does not mean that there is no problem of poverty in developed countries for even today, there are crevices and pockets in these countries where poverty of the worst kind lurks as a nagging remnant of the past. "Citizens", a board of inquiry into hunger and malnutrition in the U.S. (1990), found that in 1988 hunger and malnutrition existed in the U.S., affecting millions of Americans and was increasing in severity and extent from year to year. It was also found that hunger and malnutrition continued to take their toll in the form of infant deaths, organic brain damage, retarded growth and learning rates, increased vulnerability to disease, withdrawal, apathy, alienation, frustration and violence.

Hence, relative poverty is essentially a phenomenon of status discontent or relative deprivation. While it is easier to define and locate absolute poverty, it is very difficult to comprehend poverty in its relative dimensions.

Poverty is a vague and value-oriented term which means different things in different cultures and at different levels of economic development. It is mostly defined according to the conventions of the society in which it occurs.

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