

SOCIOLOGICAL RELEVANCE AND PERSPECTIVES OF POVERTY

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Abstract

The present paper which is on different sociological relevance and perspectives of poverty is based secondary sources of data from previously conducted studies, book publications, journal articles, reports and assorted other documents. The purpose of this paper is to know the sociological relevance of poverty approaches and provide awareness regarding perspectives of poverty including Marxian and weberian approaches of poverty. Through this paper various concepts regarding poverty become clear when we understood the different perspectives or approaches of poverty. Perspectives of poverty are providing different views of poverty whether it's socio economic rural or urban or any other approach. The concept of poverty is not confined approach to any aspect of life but an integrated or multidimensional approach when one has to understand the definitions of poverty given by different scholars. Poverty is not related to relative approaches only, it is beyond of any approach; which in reality have posture such uncertain conditions of life that in return provides overwhelming effects on the life of people who live with it.

Keywords: Relevance, perspective, indicators, confined, integrated, approach, beyond, reality, posture.

What is poverty?

How should poverty be defined? A distinction is usually made between subsistence or absolute poverty and relative poverty. Charles Booth was one of the first to try to establish a consistent standard of subsistence poverty, which refers to lack of basic requirements to sustain a physically healthy existence-sufficient food and shelter to make possible the physically efficient functioning of the body. Booth assumed that these requirements would be more or less the same for people of equivalent age and physique living in any country. This is essentially the concept still used most frequently in the analysis of poverty worldwide.

Subsistence definitions of poverty have various inadequacies, especially when formulated as a specific norm level. Unless it is set quite high, even allowing for adjustments, a single criterion of poverty tends to mean that some individuals are assessed or above the poverty line when in fact their income does not meet even their basic subsistence needs. Some parts of the country, for example, are much more expensive to live in than others. Moreover, the subsistence calculation of poverty does not take into account the impact of generally rising living standards. It is more

realistic to adjust ideas about levels of poverty to the changing norms and expectations in a society as economic growth occurs. The majority of the world's population lives in dwellings that do not contain a bath or shower; but it would be here not to see piped water as a necessity in an industrialized society. Problems with formulations of relative poverty are also complex, however income criteria are again generally used, but these conceal variability's in the actual needs people have.

How the poor are found to be obviously depends up on the definition of poverty employed. The subsistence approach first used by Seebohm Rowntree in (1899) survey of York (1901) has been criticized by Peter Townsend in particular, who has shown that the costing of 'necessities' needed by households of different size and structure to maintain their minimum efficiency does not provide a scientific and objective poverty line. The notion of substance depends on the definition of 'needs' and these can only be specified in reference to the current standards of living in the community- and such standards of living in the community-and such standards, of course, change over time (Townsend, 1962). The poor, therefore are those individuals and families whose resources, over time, fall seriously short of resources commanded by the average individual or family in the community in which they live (Townsend,1962).

In human terms poverty means little to eat and wear, and in economic terms poverty means the ability to attain a minimal standard of living. It is natural to view poverty is a failure to meet the basic requirements to attain a minimal standard of living. The concept of a minimal standard of living does, of course, vary from society to society. While biological requirements and nutritional norms provide the most elementary concept of a minimal standard of living, modern understanding of poverty requires other factors to be taken into consideration like public expenditure on social sector and other indicators of social achievement of the poor like pre-school enrollment, child mortality, immunization, mal-nutrition, life expectancy at birth, total fertility rate and maternal mortality etc., which would reflect more comprehensively the status of the living standards.

The concept of poverty was enriched by its classification. One such classification is primary poverty and secondary poverty. Rowntree (1901) distinguished the former as a situation in which families find their total earnings insufficient to obtain the minimum necessities for the maintenance of mere physical efficiency. The latter in which their earnings would be sufficient for the maintenance of mere physical efficiency provided the some real location of expenditure is made implying that poverty need not be merely a consequence of income deficiency but a consequence of leakages in household budgets by way of division of resources to wasteful items even before the primary needs are met.

Another classification of ‘poverty’ in the literature is ‘Absolute poverty’ and ‘Relative poverty’. Viewed absolutely, it is sheer deprivation or non-fulfillment of bare minimum needs of existence – of food, shelter, health or hunger, disease, ignorance or squalor in living conditions. In other words, that house hold is considered as absolutely poor which fails to provide itself with that amount of goods and services which are essential to an individual or family’s welfare. This bundle of economic goods and services are expected to consist of such calorie intake as is essential for the very human existence and some form of shelter. The absolute poverty is a measure of the overall extent of social minimum as distinct from deprivation with respect to one or more individual basic needs. In other words, it represents a socially desirable normative minimum living standard that should be assured and guaranteed to everyone in the society without ‘shame or social stigma’. Absolute poverty refers to the position of an individual or household in relation to a poverty line whose real value is fixed over time. An absolute poverty line is based on the cost of a minimum consumption basket based on the food necessary for a recommended calorie intake. The poverty line is then augmented by an allowance for non-food needs consistent with the spending patterns of the poor. Relative poverty is the contrast between the sub-subsistence living of the many and the affluence or comparative affluence of the few or the disparity between the sub human living standards of vast numbers of population and the styles of living of the small fractions of the fortunate. It thus reflects the economic distress, despair and dissension that stem from the serious inequalities in income and wealth. Relative poverty refers to the position of an individual or household compared with the average income in the country. Relative poverty lines will vary with the level of average income.

Both absolute and relative poverty are essential ingredients of the common understanding of poverty. If people are dying of hunger in a famine situation, it is a case of acute poverty even without an analysis of absolute poverty. On the other hand, even if no one goes hungry, but some are terribly deprived compared with others, they are in poverty even though the criteria are entirely relative rather than absolute.

Poverty has been understood by social scientists in a variety of ways. Being multifaceted and relative in nature any one-dimensional characterization of poverty fails to encompass the range of factors bearing on it. However, expanding the definitional range of the concept often-times leads to confusion between the causes of poverty and its consequences (Roy, 1982). The socio economic definitions of poverty necessarily presuppose some notion of welfare and involve judgment. The notion of poverty line separates population into two categories I.e., those who have an adequate level of welfare and those who do not. This is often achieved by adopting various criteria which select and label different groups as poor. These include calorie intake, protein intake, food ratio, life expectancy, gross national product (GNP), per capita income, per capita consumption, the cost of a minimally adequate range of food, and clothing and shelter

compared to income. It may be noted that these criteria are not independent. Their adoption, however leads to different criteria to identify the poor. Of all these criteria, income or consumption level has been the most frequently used. Roy (1982) considers poverty as a 'relative lack of or inaccessibility to resources and/or inability to utilize resources to achieve what is needed or desired'. To him, an adequate analysis of poverty should concentrate on both the social-institutional as well as individual-relevant characteristics.

Sociological Relevance of poverty

In sociological analysis poverty has been approached from one of three perspectives i.e., functionalist, conflict and interactionist. The functionalists hold that poverty turns into social problem when it no longer performs the function of motivating people to make productive contribution to society and poses threats to society. The conflict perspective assumes that poverty becomes a problem when a group feels that the distribution of resources in society is unfair and that should be redressed through some actions often violent in nature and which has huge social costs. Both these approaches also taken be indicative of system approach and therefore ignore personal attributes. The interactionist perspective asserts that poverty is a function of shared expectations. Poor people in society internalize the negative images of themselves propagated by the significant others and behave according to these images. The functional perspective maintains that poverty fulfils several important functions for special interest groups, guaranteeing the status of the non-poor, assisting upward mobility of the non-poor and absorbing the economic and political costs of technological and economic change.

In sociological thought, cultural and situational perspectives have been important (Rainwater, 1970; Valentine, 1968). Both of them have their ideological implications. The culturalist position proposes that the poor manifest patterns of behavior and values which are characteristically different from those of the dominant society. The culture of poverty, as Oscar Lewis (1961, 1966) proposed, is a culture of multiple disabilities and gets transmitted across generations through socialization process. Because of instability and discontinuity in family life, low motivation, sticking to present-time orientation and being fatalistic the poor are at a disadvantage. In contrast, the situational perspective fails to treat the behavior patterns of the poor as pathologies, nor is they seen as being derived as the products of a unique value system. They are normal outcomes of situations where the dominant social structure is unfavorably disposed and restrict the choice.

The assumed homogeneity of the characteristics of poor and the assumption of somewhat a closer relationship between the individual and society implied in the culture of poverty explanation are problematic (Anandlakshmy,1982). The category of poor is heterogeneous.

In an interesting analysis Shivaramayya (1988) has identified the following categories of the poor.

1. Those who do not have any means of livelihood accept the 'charity' of the society like the nonprofessional baggers, destitute etc.
2. Those who are in a position to earn livelihood but whose occupational income is of a precarious or seasonal character or is highly susceptible to the vagaries of nature (e.g. agricultural labour).
3. Those who have a fairly steady occupational income even if it is meager and inadequate.

The cultural view does not take into cognizance the perspective of the poor. It is blind to the factors such as lack of opportunity, the discriminations and the prejudices that causes much poverty. It fails to explain minority groups and women/ children who are poor. Also it obscures the vitality and resilience exhibited by at least some of the poor. The study on which cultural view is based was largely uncontrolled and the criteria of the poverty were adopted in the context of middle social class. Rodman (1971) has advanced the concept of "lower class stretch" to meet some of these problems. He thought that the poor actually share the mainstream values but must "stretch" them to fit their circumstances. If freed from poverty, they will fit in to the culture of dominant people. This view goes in favour of the 'structure of society' explanation. Its problem is that it frees the poor from responsibility. Another alternative has been proposed by those who talk of a relational perspective on poverty. It situates poor within the social structure and underlines the significance of attitudes and actions of the non-poor toward the poor and the effects of these, in turn, upon the poor themselves.

Dreze and Sen (1995) have proposed that poverty may be analyzed in the context of the notion of capability. Capability denotes alternative combinations of functions from which a person can choose. It stands for freedom or the range of options a person has in deciding what kind of life to lead. Thus, poverty 'lies not merely in the impoverished state in which the person actually lives but also in the lack of the real opportunity. It is ultimately a matter of capability deprivation'.

Perspectives of poverty

Poverty can be from objective or subjective prospective. The objective perspective (sometimes referred to as the welfare approach) involves normative judgments as to what constitutes poverty and what is required to move people out of their impoverished state. The subjective approach, on the other hand, places a premium on peoples experience, on how much they value goods and

services (hence the emphasis on individual utility). Economists have traditionally based their work on the objective approach, mainly because of the obstacles encountered when trying to aggregate multiple individual utilities across a population (Dessalien 2000). Advocates of this approach use the argument that individuals are not always the best judge of what is best for them. For example, most poverty measurement systems focus on nutritional attainments. The main argument under this focus, although all individuals value food consumption, some may place higher value on certain food types or food quantities that are not the best for their psychological well-being. It is conceivable that the subjective approach could both undervalue and overvalue food consumption when compared to the welfare approach, leading to conflicting assessments as to who are the poor. However, poverty measurement has traditionally been dominated by the objective approach. Only relatively recently the international community as a whole has taken a serious interest in measuring subjective poverty. This is mainly because of mounting recognition of the limitations associated with so- called objective indicators and the value of understanding the perspectives of the poor in shaping policies and programmes. As a result, participatory poverty assessment methodologies have been gaining ground (Dessalien 2000).

Poverty-by Marxian perspective and Weberian perspectives

From a Marxian perspective, poverty is a system of inequality generated by the capitalist economy. The Marxian model of stratification in capitalist society is not particularly sensitive to variations in wealth within the working class. It fails to clearly differentiate the poor from the other wage earners and to provide an explanation for their poverty. Although many of the arguments in this section are provided by researchers committed to Marxian perspective. Their views may be presented within a Weberian framework. Weber argues that an individual's 'class situation' is depend up on his 'market situation', on the amount of power he has to influence the workings of the market in his favour and on the rewards his skill and expertise can command in a competitive market. From this perspective groups such as the aged, the chronically sick, and a single parent families have little power in the market and therefore receive little reward. Indeed, their circumstances largely prevent them from competing in the market. However, not all members of these groups are poor, and this is referable to their market situation prior to their present circumstances. Thus Westergaard and Resler state, 'subsistence poverty is indeed common among old people, the sick, the handicapped, and so on; but only because the majority of the old, sick and handicapped have previously been dependent on jobs that provided them with few or no other resources to fall back on than meager benefits of public funds'. The poverty of the old, sick, handicapped and single parent families is largely working-class poverty. Members of other social classes have sufficient income to save, invest in pension schemes, insurance schemes and in shareholdings for themselves and their dependents and so guard against the threat of poverty due to the death of the breadwinner, sickness or old age. In this

sense, social class rather than personal disability, inadequacy, or misfortune accounts for poverty.

Although this approach has some merit, it also has important drawbacks. As Westergaard and Resler argue, 'it diverts attention from the larger structure of inequality in which poverty is embedded'. Thus the poor must be seen in relation to the class system as a whole, not simply as an isolated group. Ralph Miliband makes similar point. He argues that the position of the poor is not that dissimilar from that of the working class as a whole. The poor are simply the most disadvantaged section of the working class rather than a separate group. To understand poverty, it is therefore necessary to understand the nature of inequality in a class stratified society. Miliband concludes that, 'the basic fact is that the poor are an integral part of the working class- its poorest and most disadvantaged stratum. They need to be seen as such, as a part of a continuum, the more as so many workers who are not "deprived" in the official sense live in permanent danger of entering the ranks of the deprived; and that they share in any case many of the disabled vantages which afflict the deprived. Poverty is a class thing, closely linked to a general situation of class inequality.

Conclusion

The perspectives of poverty are suggesting that the poverty is multidimensional in nature. The relative approaches of poverty are narrow because they focused only on certain aspects or manifestations, and did not consider other important aspects of poverty like employment, education, health, social security, and so on; which are normally available to the members of other groups in societies and that are fundamental to social integration. Therefore poverty should be understood from different aspects and we should take care of each and every aspect of poverty as if we take care any relative aspect of poverty then we lack other aspects of poverty and the cycle of poverty move on. So special attention must be paid to various aspects or factors and processes that can improve the life of poor people and make living of poor people sustainable.

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