

# Sociology of Poverty: Quest for a New Horizon

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*It is the common end of the most diverse destinies, an ocean into which lives derived from the most diverse social strata flow together. No change, no development, no polarization or breakdown of social life occurs without leaving its residuum in the stratum of poverty.  
Thus, what makes one poor is not the lack of means. The poor person, sociologically speaking, is the individual who receives assistance because of this lack of means.*

Georg Simmel

## Introduction

One of the key factors that led to the emergence of sociology was research into poverty. In both Britain and France the rise of sociology was accompanied by poverty studies. Yet from 1940s sociologists moved away from poverty studies. One path of exit was a change of terminology in which the poor was increasingly replaced by the lower class and from the problems of the poor to the fertile terrain of deviance and crime. Another was a shift of the sociological interest away from the lower to the middle class – an area where research funds were abundant and which was more suitable for survey research that was fast becoming the preferred method in sociology (Roach and Roach 1972). The sociological interest in poverty rekindled during the 1960s when poverty was rediscovered in USA. But after the failure of anti-poverty agenda of 1960s in USA and fall of the modernization paradigm, sociologists gradually retreated from poverty studies as well as from development studies. The field was largely taken over by economists (Jordan, 1996). Most of the sociologists engaged in poverty studies mainly focused on policy research.

Poverty studies have definitely been animated by larger and nobler visions like one provided by Sen. In spite of such efforts, it is apparent that in the absence of a strong tradition of interdisciplinary research the field has remained fragmented. Poverty studies have largely been confined to the rites of headcount, if not headhunting. There does not seem to be an adequate theory of poverty.

The emergence of the perspective of exclusion offers a broad terrain in which adequate sociological theories of deprivation and poverty can be constructed. The current discourse of exclusion represents the social predicament of the North. A great deal of theoretical work is needed before the perspective can be meaningfully deployed in the south. The objective of this paper is to undertake a brief analysis of the current theories of poverty, situate the status of the perspective of exclusion among these theories and indicate how sociological theories of poverty can be developed

## Sociology of poverty

In 1972 the editors of the Penguin reader on poverty found that sociology of poverty did not exist because there was very little theoretical or conceptual analysis of the phenomenon (Roach and Roach, 1972). Recently one author has forcefully pointed out:

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"Not only there has there been no theory of poverty and social exclusion that explains the economics of collective action in exclusive groups; there has really been no theory of poverty and exclusion at all" (Jordan, 1996:81).

## **Present state of theory in poverty**

According to Jordan (1996), there are two broad traditions of poverty discourse in the West that has taken shape and crystallized over a period of more than two hundred years. The first is the Anglo-Saxon liberal tradition and the second is the continental mercantilist tradition. The Anglo-Saxon - liberal tradition focuses on the 'competitive interaction under scarcity' (Jordan, 1996:4) and the nature of collective action that it gives rise to. The continental mercantilist tradition has been preoccupied with harnessing human resources for enrichment of the state. The poor are like sheep and cattle to be farmed for the glory of the rich.

More generally Kerbo (1996) has identified four different types of poverty theory.

### **Social Darwinian theory of poverty**

This is the first theory that emerged within sociology and it tried to explain poverty in terms of the behaviour and attitudes of the poor themselves. The poor were poor because they did not work hard, they squandered money on 'gambling, drinking and unnecessary luxuries and they had disorder of family life. They had no ambition, no inner call for work, were fatalistic, and suffered from "an intractable ineducability" as the Brock Committee phrased it (cited in Matza, 1966:294). Even a whole nation was conceived in these terms.

"All the faculties of his soul that despotism has touched are blighted; the wounds there are large and deep. All this part of him is vice, whether it be cowardice, indolence, knavery or cruelty; half of the Irishman is a slave" (Beaumont, a French observer, cited in Matza, 1966:300).

Everywhere the poor made up the "dangerous classes" living in "regions of squalid want and wicked woe"(cited in Matza, 1066:302). Both Malthus and Herbert Spencer thought that only hunger could teach the poor civility and subjection (Townsend).

A more recent proponent of this view has been the US new right. George Gilder, Murray and Richard Hernstein have argued that the poor are genetically blueprinted to be at the bottom of the social hierarchy. The poor are poor because they have low IQ and low mental capacity and biologically destined to be poor. The welfare system that underwrites this human substratum of deviance is a sheer wastage of resources and should be dismantled (Kerbo, 1996).

### **Culture of poverty**

The second theory is the theory of culture of poverty developed by Oscar Lewis, an anthropologist in 1959. Lewis developed his theory from his experience of Mexico. The culture of poverty is a specific syndrome that grows up in some situations. It requires an economic setting of cash economy, a high rate of unemployment and under employment, low wages and people with low skills. In the absence of voluntary or state support and stable family, the low-income population tends to develop the culture of poverty against the dominant ideology of accumulation of the middle class. The poor realize that they have a marginal position within a highly stratified and individualistic capitalistic society, which does not offer them any prospect for upward mobility. In order to survive the poor have to develop their own institutions and agencies because the larger society tends to ignore and bypass them. Thus the poor come to embody a common set of values, norms and pattern of behaviour, which is different from the general culture as such. In short the poor has a way of life – a specific subculture. Lewis found 70 traits that underlay this subculture. He classified these traits into four types.

- *Relationships between the subculture and the larger society*  
People either disengage or maintain distance from the larger society. They do not belong to labour unions or political parties, go to banks or hospitals or enjoy leisure facilities of the city. They have a high mistrust of the dominant institutions of society.
- *Nature of the slum community*  
The slum community is characterized by poor housing and overcrowding and a minimum of organizational structure beyond the space of family. These institutions grow up mainly to meet their minimum needs. The slum economy is inward looking. It is embedded in pawning of personal goods, informal credit and use of second hand goods.
- *Nature of the family*: bilateral kinship system, unstable marriage, matrifocal family,
- *Attitudes, values and personality of the individual*: The individual has 'a strong feeling of fatalism, helplessness, dependence and inferiority'; a weak ego tuned to the gratification in the present and a strong preoccupation with masculinity.

Once the subculture is formed it tends to be perpetuated. It is transmitted from one generation to another through socialization

The theory of culture of poverty has been greatly misunderstood and misused. Lewis saw it as an extreme form of adaptation that the poor are forced to make under certain circumstances and in certain places. The poor rejects the dominant culture and its institutions because they do not serve them. Their own subculture grows out of despair and protest.

The theory has been found particularly influential in the study of the underclass. In 1962 Gunnar Myrdal (1962) coined the term underclass to identify the Americans who were at the bottom of labour market-unemployed or underemployed and were thus excluded from the mainstream of social life. In recent years the underclass has become an increasingly important island of humanity in the West living off welfare or crime. Charles Murray (1984), a New Right theorist has argued that welfare dependency has led to the breakdown of the nuclear family and formation of a counter culture that encourages dependency and criminality.

### **Situational Theory of poverty**

The situational theory of poverty holds that the poor behave differently because they do not have the resources and opportunities for adopting the middle class life styles. Young people have few opportunities to go to college and so they drop out. Women prefer matrifocal family because it allows them to have greater claim upon their children.

The situational theory gives importance to the structural conditions that give rise to poverty, but it also tends to focus upon the individual responses to the objective situation of poverty. It differs from the culture of poverty theory in a fundamental sense. It does not assume the pre-existence of a subculture that gives coherence and solidity to the behaviour of the poor. The situational theory holds that individuals rationally follow a pattern of behaviour, which is suitable for the objective situation of their life. It has been argued from this perspective that the poor do not follow middle class values because they know that they cannot achieve it. So in practice they tolerate large deviations from middle class aspirations. This has been described as the lower class 'value stretch' (Rodman, 1963; Della Fave, 1974).

### **Structural theory of poverty**

Structural theories of poverty hold that poverty is caused by the structure of the larger socio-economic order. It is the macro structure of society that produces inequality and consequently poverty. The structure of global capitalism, for example, gives rise to inequality and large-scale poverty all over the world.

Marxism of different varieties has remained a major theoretical perspective for understanding poverty. Dependency theory, which emerged in Latin America, has been particularly concerned with third world poverty. Theory of marginalization again of Latin American vintage has a rich tradition of exploring the fate of human deprivation and marginality. Another key phrase that has become immensely popular in recent years is social exclusion (Friedman, 1996).

The term social exclusion was coined in France by Rene Lenoir in 1974 (Gore, 1995; Silver, 1995; Haan, 1998). But it is to be pointed out that Georg Simmel (1858-1918), a German sociologist outlined a sociological perspective on social exclusion and inclusion as early as 1908 that may even be superior to current discourse on social exclusion. "This perspective is still topical, and it can be argued that in some respects Simmel's analysis is superior to later treatments of such processes" (Hvinden,). In Renoir's view exclusion referred to people who were excluded from employment-based social security system. It became a popular term in France in 1980s to express new forms of poverty associated with technological change and economic restructuring--unemployment, ghettoisation, disruptions of family. It did not replace poverty as a concept but referred to the broader process of social disintegration – an increasing rupture of bond between the individual and society. In the World Summit held in Copenhagen in 1995 the term was officially adopted. In this conference social exclusion was seen as a major problem alongside poverty. The term achieved a conceptual stretch through the research of International Institute of Labour Studies, which found that the new term was useful for four reasons (Clert, 1999).

- First, it allowed broadening the conventional poverty analysis. It could include civil and political rights.
- Secondly, it provided scope for focusing on 'situations of social disadvantage and the mechanisms which lead to them' (cited in Clert, 1999: 177).
- Thirdly it stressed upon the role of actors in exclusion and inclusion.
- Finally, social exclusion was viewed as a property of the institutional framework and processes that underlay exclusion (Clert, 1999).
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Gradually the concept was adopted by other agencies including the World Bank. The popularization of the concept was also due to the fact that sociologists and anthropologists began to rejoin the field of poverty studies. This shift of discourse has broadened arena of poverty studies in some major ways.

- The shift of discourse has led to the re-emergence of the theme of inequality within and across nations.
- One of its particular concerns has been the adverse impact of globalization.
- A third area has become the heightened concern with political freedom- democracy and citizenship rights
- Fourthly, the term has led to the celebration of cultural diversities and plurality of values.

The perspective has made clear that the identities of the poor based on age, sex, ethnicity and disability are socially constructed. Certain groups within society become vulnerable because of discrimination. It has led the study of poverty away from a 'goods-centred' approach to people-centred approach. The first emphasized upon the command over commodities that led to greater utility and welfare. The latter view stressed upon human capabilities and their freedom of choice

The exclusion perspective has increasingly achieved theoretical clarity and sophistication. Gore (1995) argues that the process of exclusion that occurs through the institutions of market, state and civil society can be understood in terms of four determinants.

1. The first is the rapid transnationalization of economy, modernization of society and decreasing role of the nation state.
2. The second is the change in the supply and distribution of economic, political and cultural assets in the face of unpredictable economic change.
3. The third is social and political structures through which power is exercised and relationships among groups and individuals are defined.
4. The nature of the state and its role in the process of allocation and accumulation

Silver (1996) has shown that the perspective can be best understood in terms of three paradigms—solidarity, specialization and monopoly. The first stems from the philosophy of republicanism underwritten by Rousseau and Durkheim which stresses upon moral integration of society and cultural boundary and the lack of which leads to exclusion. This paradigm has been greatly influenced by sociology, anthropology and cultural studies. It is dominant in France (Haan, 1998).

The second paradigm is known as specialization and grounded in liberalism and in the philosophy of Locke and Madison, which emphasizes interdependence of specialized spheres of society in terms of exchange of goods and services. One inevitable consequence of liberalism is discrimination and the creation of the underclass. This paradigm is associated with neo-classical economics, theories of political pluralism and mainstream sociology, especially rational/public choice theories. It is particularly influential in USA.

The monopoly paradigm draws on, Weber, Marx and Marshal and views the social order as coercive. The mechanisms of class, status and political power as enunciated by Weber tend to create inequality and formation of monopoly groups, which perpetuate their power and privileges through social closure and labour market segregation. This social closure can be reversed through enlargement of social democracy and citizenship rights. It is dominant in Britain. It is to be admitted that the approach has faced serious criticisms. The term has been viewed as too broad and vague and thus useless for scientific analysis. More importantly, a key issue has been its relevance for the study of third world poverty.

Yet the advantages of the social exclusion approach are obvious. Haan (1998) argues that social exclusion has many advantages over other related terms. It gives us a broader view of deprivation focusing upon societal mechanisms, institutions and strategic actors causing it. Thus it can be used to link up macro and micro processes. Rodgers (1996) holds that the term social exclusion offers a multi-dimensional and multi-disciplinary view of poverty. It allows us to view poverty as a process. The impact of exclusion can be seen at various levels. It can illuminate the relationship between structure and agency. It has been held that the perspective of social exclusion can be deployed fruitfully in the South for a coherent analysis of poverty and blueprinting consistent anti-poverty policy measures. Most importantly, it allows the scope for a more relational and comprehensive analysis of poverty.

It can be argued at the same time that this perspective allows for the development of a sociologically grounded analysis of poverty. It makes it possible to look into the causes, processes and consequences of poverty as well as the way the discourse of poverty is constructed and deprived people react in a variety of ways to the existing situation of their life. The sociology of poverty by focusing on the institutional mechanism of inequality provides a deeper analysis of material and discursive aspects of poverty, the way poor are constructed as a social category and the way stigma is associated with it. It can powerfully interconnect structure, discourse and agency and show that poverty is largely a social construction along with countervailing action. In recent years we have begun to hear the voices of the poor. But we need to know more about the way the historical destiny of deprived people are created materially and symbolically and how they live with and struggle against their socially constructed fate. It demands the development of a proper sociological perspective on poverty.

## Poverty discourse in Bangladesh

Poverty discourse in Bangladesh has been mainly concerned with income poverty and counting of the poor. It has looked into poverty trends over time and determinants of poverty. In recent years there has been some efforts to broaden the discourse in terms of its interface with human development. The social and cultural aspects of poverty has received attention in recent studies of poverty undertaken by PPRC and Proshika. But in many ways the discourse is limited and constricted. There is a need to further broaden the discourse.

I had conducted a study of two villages in 2001 through the technique of rapid rural appraisal through the support of the PPRC research team. It was aimed at exploring the changing pattern of livelihoods and poverty.

These two villages provided two different patterns of exclusion. The section below encapsulates some aspects of exclusion in these villages.

### Haorpur

This village was situated in the haor area of Sunamganj. The geographical exclusion was quite pronounced. The village could be reached from the Upazila headquarters by crossing a river and walking about 5 kilometres of dirt road in the dry season. During the monsoon the boat was the only means of communication. The village had a precarious agricultural regime –a combination of monocrop and fish subject to the high vulnerability of flash flood.

The critical area of exclusion was governance failure. The chairman of the union parishad, a wealthy man who had returned after years in England had built a huge mansion in the middle of the haor. He had collected around him a retinue of strong men and had established his sway completely over the area. He had grabbed the land of the minorities and driven them away from the village. He had no office. It was wherever he was. He was successful in establishing a patrimonial rule in miniature and a regime of fear.

This example provides a critical issue of exclusion vs. inclusion in the context of clientelistic politics, which needs further elaboration and research.

The second aspect of exclusion was bureaucratic dysfunction that led to livelihood failure. The flood control measures of BWDB were often faulty and made the village vulnerable to flash flood. This was especially true for earthwork, which would be started too late and left incomplete. This often results in the total loss of crops in the course of a single day.

Other key areas of exclusion are health and education and developmental support through NGOs. One NGO had begun work here and then had withdrawn. Employment opportunities beyond agriculture are slim. Young people educated from secondary school to college are totally unemployed. Their only hope is some kind of work outside the country. Poverty is stark. People pursue two livelihoods strategies –deepening of mutual self-help mechanism within respective samaj bodies and seasonal labour migration.

Lalmaj in Comilla provides an opposite picture. It is located near a high way in the heart of Green Revolution belt. Here the traditional samaj has been taken over by a credit society led by a local business entrepreneur. This CBO has built up social capital and a new civic community in the village. It has been instrumental in motivating people to have sanitary latrines in most houses in the village. It has set up a high school and was trying to bring gas connection in the village. People have achieved a new sense of dignity and self –help. It was voiced by a widow. ‘No one can be poor if he/she has a pair of hands.’ Remittances from international migration, intensive agriculture and non-farm work have provided relative prosperity to the village. There is little income poverty. There is community support for the less well off. Thus Lalmaj provides an example of the role of agency in creating social capital and community solidarity.

### **Ratanpur**

It is a village in Shariatpur that has almost all the characteristics of an urban agglomeration. Situated on the bank of mighty Padma, the village has suffered from river erosion and its prime agricultural land has shrunk over the years. As a monocrop area its agricultural resources are few. Its critical resource is its location as a river station for launches and steamers with direct communication links with Dhaka. It has made migration easy even for poor women. Thus migration provides a major livelihoods opportunity for people in the village. International migration has been a major phenomenon for the village. One can even say Ratanpur has a counterpart village in Italy. A part of agricultural labour force has mainly opted for non-farm activities around the local area. The extremely deprived people live in slum like dwellings on the public land. Some of these make shift dwellings sport teacups, cosmetics and photographs of Bangladeshi and Indian film stars. These deprived people are becoming increasingly excluded from the safety nets of the indigenous samaj. The old and infirm are trapped into extreme deprivation. The able – bodied people have income opportunities. There are, of course, spells of hunger during monsoon and flood. The routine charity is decreasing, but charity during ceremonial occasions has increased with increasing wealth of the rich.

The village has a rich heritage of cultural and religious diversities. It is a major center for syncretistic religion. Its local theatre group has a long history possibly over a period of more than 50 years. Its religious shrine is an instance of social capital where people from several districts give free labour during ceremonial occasions.

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