

## Challenges in Constructing the Sociological Concept of Poverty<sup>1</sup>

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The concept of poverty remained loaded with biological and economic connotations for a long time. The well known DCI and CBN methods are the examples of this kind. In the former concept poverty is defined as the shortfall in specific amounts of calorie intake and in the latter the shortfall is in accessing poverty income<sup>3</sup>.

In the words of the critic there are a number of limitations to the use of these concepts. In a recent paper I have dealt extensively with the factors that are responsible for causing variation in the use of the above two concepts<sup>4</sup>. While some criticisms are technical in nature others are axiomatic. In proposing an alternative sociological perspective one has to deal with both of these. We shall discuss a few of these criticisms very briefly before we proceed to the main theme of the paper. In the axiomatic type the critics point out that the nutrition and income concepts give a partial picture of what we understand as the human condition in a more comprehensive manner. Taking food-need, as the main type of need, it is argued, is tantamount to treating the human beings as "livestock". Moreover, there are other important dimensions about human condition that deserve adequate attention. With the introduction of the concept of Human Well-being like HDI and others this has changed. With the arrival of HDI the significance of other variables have come into notice<sup>5</sup>. For example, attention has also gone to health and education. In a broad sense this last issues also belong to the sociological factors so how can we justify the attempt to find out a sociological perspective? The present paper seeks to answer this question.

### What is the basis for calling for sociological perspective:

In a broad sense the economic aspect is a part of sociological domain because we claim that society consists of different institutions including the economic. However, there are some factors considered as the core the discipline of economics as there are a few factors considered as the core of the discipline of sociology. Income is one such core concept of economics (there are others such as production or distribution), while culture or social structure is the core sociological concept. The difference between the sociological and economic approaches to address the issue of poverty, therefore, has other implications. For example, one could obtain a more comprehensive account on the issue of poverty looking at it from a structural position. Poverty profile is not a still photograph but also a part of a process. A food deprived or income deprived person holds a particular position in society, which needs to be clearly defined to obtain a complete profile of poverty. Additional information is also sought not only to increase the

<sup>1</sup> The paper was first presented at a seminar on 'Exploring the Sociological Perspective of Poverty', 7 May, 2004, Dhaka, organized by the Bangladesh Sociological Society

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<sup>3</sup> Brief meaning of the DCI, CBN and other related measures may be found in the following: *The Second Assessment Study of BRAC's Rural Development Programme*, Edited by AMM Husain, 1998, BRAC, Rahman H.Z, Hossain M., & Sen B., *Dynamics of Rural Poverty in Bangladesh*, BIDS, 1996; Sen A. *Poverty and Famine: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*, ELBS edition, 1987; Streeten, P., 'Poverty Concepts and Measurement' in *The Bangladesh Development Studies*, Vol. XVIII, September, No.3, 1990.

<sup>4</sup> Khan MI, 'Broadening of the Concept of Poverty: Consensus and Polemics', Paper presented in the in-country symposium on Poverty and Population on 30.4.04, organized by the Department of Population Science, University of Dhaka.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

knowledge stock but also to shed light on the measures that may be required to reduce poverty. Even in the still photograph there is a part, which point to the total profile. So why focus on only food or income, why not social rights or status of a person because by changing the focus we also change the concept of poverty. The concept loaded with the notion of food requirement stress on the availability of food. On the other hand, if it is conceptualized in terms of lacking human dignity, the stress is on the ways that reduces marginality in society.

Therefore, it requires a further sharpening of the 'desired' profile of a person to build a sociological perspective of poverty. The modern concept of "citizen" could be a point of departure to obtain the desired profile. The meaning of citizenship implies that an individual has access to certain rights such as security of life, security of property, freedom of expression and of course subsistence. Other domains of rights could also be used to explain the meaning of poverty.

One cannot also ignore the relevance of "class" and the stages of social development to explain poverty. If we shift our attention from the issue of biological survival then it will be easier to pay attention to the other types of meaning attached to the condition a person is expected to live in. Membership in a higher class gives a person higher dominance, higher dignity and higher importance not accessed by other classes. The privileged class becomes a model. Social aspiration of an individual is greatly influenced by the existence of such a model class. There are different types of discrimination in different societies and the end of discrimination is considered a desired condition. Accordingly, the reduction of discrimination is often considered as a goal.

#### **A Brief review of the non-economic concepts of poverty:**

1. The name of Oscar Lewis became prominent when he propounded the cause of poverty rooted in the culture of a community<sup>6</sup>. It came to be known as the "Culture of Poverty". It primarily implies a certain kind of worldview and mindset. In this worldview there is no urge and initiative to improve the condition of life. A relevant example could be a beggar. He is used to living on charity, he may not be hard working or interested in doing labor. With such drawbacks poverty is a natural consequence. Laziness is often considered as a factor of poverty in the concept of Oscar Lewis. When the culture is supportive of hard work social condition will automatically improve. However, Oscar Lewis does not pay attention to identifying a parameter that will help to express poverty. His focus is on the general standard of living of a community. In the theory of Oscar Lewis certain condition in culture is referred to as poverty. Not having ambition or dream is an expression of poverty. On the other hand, the consequence of not nurturing a dream is to be in poverty.

The idea of Lewis came under strong attack. According to the critics poverty is not determined by the subjective condition. It also smacks of racism to claim that some culture is inherently unproductive. What matters are the resource endowment, educational level, and opportunities. One cannot create opportunity on her own. If it is there one can take the initiative to get access to it. For example, if there is a school, the children may be sent there. If there is money one can think of making investment. So scope has to be given to get access to money. The critic prioritizes social structure in determining poverty in society. On the other hand whom we call poor are not indifferent to hard work as is claimed by Lewis. Think of a small peasant in rural Bangladesh or an agricultural worker; he works from early morning to dusk with little break. Yet, with a lesser amount of labor the large peasant earns more than him. The difference in the ownership of assets explains the difference in their economic conditions, not the reluctance to work.

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<sup>6</sup> Oscar, L. (1959), *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty*, New York: Basic Books.

2. In a recent analysis it is said that there is a condition called chronic poverty and the peasant culture may be a factor of the continuity of poverty. The proponent of this view is Geoff Wood<sup>7</sup>. To some extent the argument of Wood has a similarity to that of Chayanov, who long ago propounded the theory of peasant economy<sup>8</sup>. If we briefly recall, it was observed that the capitalistic profit motive does not operate in the logic of peasant economy, they are motivated by other factors, such as increasing need of the family or the necessity of leisure time.

Wood has related peasant culture in the following manner. Long term investment or the desire for future receives less priority in a culture prevalent in peasant community. In a society where the influence of peasant culture is still strong, aspiration for future good may be found weak among the community members. For example, education seeks an investment that does not promise a quick return. It is a long-term investment. If someone does not express any interest for such long-term investment he won't be able to reap the expected benefit. Wood argued that when a poor person prefers spending in consumption to spending in education it implies that the priority is the immediate survival. In Wood's term the poor is a person who can't fight the process of poverty over a long period and prioritizes the immediate survival.

One may not agree with the theory that in peasant culture there is little interest in a long-term investment, which is needed to come out of the poverty trap. Any culture is an outcome of the response of the people to its environment. Meeting the subsistence need may be an important priority in the agenda of a peasant family but there are other factors that significantly influence the economic decision-making. For example, availability of a large surplus is not common or that agricultural goods do not bring return in a consistent manner. There is evidence that even among the peasants many gradually transform into a rich farmer or are inclined to regular market production. Giving emphasis to cultural factor is not new in economic analysis, in the writing of classical sociologist such as Weber this was reflected when he argued that a particular religious ideology created the ground for the emergence of capitalistic spirit.

3. The third view observes that the existing definition on poverty is not respectful of the human values<sup>9</sup>. By giving exclusive emphasis on food in the definition of poverty other important elements are neglected. By confining human needs to food only the concept of poverty is dehumanized. It gives the impression that the objective of human existence is only to survive physically. But there is also the need to live with dignity and respect. There is need for recognition, realization of the human potential. When the entire focus goes to meeting the 'basic need', primarily food, it is branded as the 'livestock concept'. It has the further implication that the above philosophy is mainly geared to the need of a materialist society that requires unhindered supply of human labor. There is an indication of exploitation underlying such an approach. It is the priority of the class commanding the main resources; the dependent class is engaged simply in responding to that priority. Such a view completely reverses the existing notion of 'basic need' and includes a wide range of socio-psychological elements.

4. The lack of power is often identified as the main shortcoming of the poor<sup>10</sup>. Thus empowerment becomes the primary objective of changing the condition of the poor. This view reflects important

<sup>7</sup> Wood, G., (2003) ' Staying Secure, Staying Poor: The "Faustain Bargain", in *World Development Staying Secure, Staying Poor: The "Faustain Bargain", in WORLD DEVELOPMENT*, Vol 31, No. 3, March 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Chayanov AV, (1966), *The Theory of Peasant Economy*, Thorner, Smith & Kerbly (eds.), Irwin.

<sup>9</sup> RIB Conception and Research Ideas of RIB, Inaugural paper, 2002, p-6.

<sup>10</sup> Khan & Howladar, Betteile, Lovell On empowerment see Betteile, A., 'Empowerment', *Economic and Political Weekly*, March 6 – 13, 1999. Khan MI & Howladar SR, *Does Approach Matter in Poverty Reduction – An Empirical Study on Micro-Credit Food Assistance and Employment Programmes in Bangladesh*, APPL : Dhaka, 2003, Lovell, CH, *Breaking the Cycle of Poverty, - The BRAC Strategy*, 1992, UPL : Dhaka.

insight. There are different dimensions of the marginal status in society. It may be there in terms of the position in the power structure, rights to express opinion or accessing the resources. With the empowerment of the marginal people it is possible to reduce or eliminate these factors. The importance of power structure is manifold. Not only does it increase and decrease the position in society but it also helps to protect different rights. It is said that women's deprivation in Bangladesh society is largely related to their subordinate position in power structure. Systematically they have been isolated from the important places in society and confined to the boundary of the household. The isolation is culturally rooted in the norm of *purdah*. Another dimension is the close relation between the command over the economic resource and the place in the power structure. As a result power structure is now primarily serving the interest of those who command economic resources. In the concept of empowerment the change is conceived not only in the increased access to material resources but also to the orbit of power structure. It may also include self-dependence, role in the decision making process and others.

5. The absence of 'agency' or will to establish one's own rights is also seen as a mark of poverty<sup>11</sup>. As we know 'agency' is posed against 'structure'. If by structure we mean something imposing from above 'agency' is the means for change. In a class divided society it is not possible for the poor to use own 'agency' to rise against the 'structure' that account for their deprivation. There is a need for social mobilization. Through mobilization it is possible for the poor to establish their rights. Thus in a simple categorization following the logic of mobilization the poor are those who accept the dictate of the structure generating deprivation passively and the non-poor are those who challenge the deprivation.

#### **Issue of measurement in poverty analysis**

In poverty analysis measurement is an important objective. There are two functions of measurement. In assessing the level of development and tracking change in the socioeconomic situation. The proportion of poor is counted by using the head count ratio. The measurement is carried out by using calorie intake or income. It is also noted that further sophistication has been made to capture the heterogeneity among the poor as articulated in the concept of FGT index. At the same time, it is found that a great amount of arbitrariness is involved in the above concepts. Derived generalization is, in a way, more apparent than real. We are not dealing with these much talked about limitations in detail as they have been reported elsewhere.

It is important to remember that the social profile of an individual is much wider than generally perceived in the conventional concept of poverty. Also that health and literacy have now been included in the concept of development index. However, our social condition is formed by a number of descriptive categories, not amenable to quantitative expression on easy terms. For example, awareness level on the issue of poverty is a subjective matter, difficult to measure in terms of statistical scale. In the same manner sense of dignity, motivation to end the process of deprivation are all qualitative issues. If a social profile of a poor comprises of the necessary dimensions noted above a greater insight can be obtained.

#### **Outline of a matrix on sociological profile of poverty: Agency Poor and Resource Poor**

We have assembled here a number of theories and views to illustrate the alternative perspective to define the issues of poverty and empowerment. Innovation and uniqueness of what we

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<sup>11</sup> Khan MI, 2004, Op.Cit, Field experience with Nijera Kori, and the strategy of PROSHIKA, Nijera Kori, SAMATA.

discussed in terms of the relevant concepts are found at the axiomatic level. The strength of the concept is not in developing a measurable indicator as much as is in opening a new horizon of assessment. There has been little dispute that the construction of social profile in the context of poverty needs to consider multiple aspects, going beyond the subsistence priority. The issue of physical subsistence is certainly important, but other priorities are equally important both as an end and means to an end. A simple observation may be recounted here; when we prepare our social profile, we pay attention to various things, such as lineage background, parent's occupation or social status. But while we seek to identify the need of the 'poor' we remain confined to the food status only. This is too narrow an approach and not compatible with the profile of a dignified man.

With this brief background a matrix has been proposed to verify the poverty status in the community. It involves both the quantitative and qualitative components of the social profile. Even if they are not as quantifiable as income or calorie intake they are at least empirically verifiable. It is now well recognized that every aspect of our social profile is not quantifiable and need not be so. For example, in rural Bangladesh lineage background is an important component of social capital, which is a descriptive category. The matrix can be used at the individual household level, the way we often administer the survey questionnaire (e.g., we use a senior member as the proxy).

Valuable asset may include cultivable land (not homestead land). Own income may come from selling labor, trade, service and others engaged in exchange relationship. The activities of the rights based group may include mobilizing the deprived people and demand access to different services and resources from the public institution. Social deprivation may not be passively accepted, the victims may be critical of it while the others may take initiative to reduce its effect. To be critical is the evidence of social awareness changing the self-dignity of a person called as a poor person.

Matrix to review poverty status:

Non-material aspect	Material aspect
Depend on own income	Not owning valuable asset
Member of a rights based group	
Critical about unequal social structure	

With the above parameters we may go on individual terms and identify the proportion of those deprived of material aspect. Similarly, the ranking may be done on the basis of non-material aspects. Construction of composite index is possible. We may divide the categories of marginal people in terms of poverty status on the basis of two sets of variables as 'agency poor' and the 'resource poor'. The reference point for the first category would be variables that we considered as non-material aspect and the second the material aspect related variables.