

## THE CHANGING FACE OF POVERTY: A BRIEF REVIEW

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### Introduction

Poverty has been a persistent problem in India pre and post-independence. Instead of decreasing, poverty in India has expanded laterally and vertically despite the measures undertaken by the succeeding governments post-independence. As poverty essentially means deprivation, the economic perspective towards poverty has its base in the requisite income earning capacity or the lack of it. However the face of economic research into the phenomenon of poverty has diversified post the period of 'conceptual ferment' as characterized by developmental economist Ravi Kanbur. Today 'Poverty' and 'Inequality' are studied with a qualitative aspect of research along with quantitative. The present article tries to understand the many faces of 'Poverty Phenomenon'.

Many of the mythological narrations have found an existence in today's world. The gargantuan problem of poverty can be likened to one such mythological creature which terrorized the people of yore. According to the Greek Mythology, "The Lernaean Hydra" was an ancient nameless serpent-like chthonic water beast that possessed many heads— the poets mention more heads than the vase-painters could paint, and for each head cut off it grew two more — and poisonous breath so virulent even her tracks were deadly. Its lair was the lake of Lerna in the Argolid. Beneath the waters was an entrance to the Underworld, and the Hydra was its guardian."

Poverty is thus in essence deprivation from essentialities of life, a pronounced deprivation in well-being. The notion of 'Poverty' was first defined by Professor Peter Townsend, in trying to understand the meaning of 'welfare state'. His main contention in trying to define subsistence is that both 'poverty' and 'subsistence' are relative concepts and that they can only be defined in relation to the material and emotional resources available at a particular time to the members either of a particular society or different societies. He defined poverty as when someone's "resources are so

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seriously below those commanded by the average individual or family that they are, in effect, excluded from ordinary living patterns, customs and activities.”

Thus initially the study of poverty was wholly related to money earned. The historical measure of poverty was income earned or the purchasing power which determined the extent of essentialities that could be obtained. As stated by Seebohm Rowntree in 1901; families living in poverty were those 'whose total earnings are insufficient to obtain the minimum necessities for the maintenance of merely physical efficiency'. Poverty was initially defined in income space i.e. poverty was inability of a person to earn as much money as was required to purchase the basic necessities in life.

Within the scope of this narrow definition, poverty is usually measured as either absolute or relative poverty. Absolute poverty refers to a set standard which is consistent over time and between countries. As defined by the World Bank, “Extreme poverty is living on less than US \$1.25 per day, and moderate poverty as less than \$2 a day. It estimates that "in 2001, 1.1 billion people had consumption levels below \$1 a day and 2.7 billion lived on less than \$2 a day.”

Relative poverty is a perspective which is based on comparison. It argues that people are poor when they are very much worse off than other people in their society. Relative poverty views poverty as dependent on society. Hence relative poverty is measured as the percentage of population with income less than some fixed proportion of median income. It is a measure of income inequality. In most of the developing countries the focus is on fixed income thresholds, as where both absolute and relative poverty are prevalent, it is absolute poverty which is (by far) the more serious issue. However the classification i.e. relative and absolute essentially deals with measurement. The extent of poverty, however, is much influenced by how poverty is defined. The traditional interpretation links ‘well-being’ primarily to command over commodities, so the poor are those who do not have enough income or consumption to put them above some adequate minimum threshold. This view sees poverty largely in monetary terms.(Introduction To Poverty Analysis World Bank Institute August 2005).

The use of food intake everyday as a measure of Poverty can first be attributed to Rowntree who saw at the end of the nineteenth

century that the work of nutritionists could be used in social surveys of populations to illuminate, more objectively than in the past, the living standards of poor families. He based his study on the work of an American nutritionist, Atwater, in fixing on the nutrients required by adults and children. Broadly speaking, what he did was to select, from conflicting data, figures of the number of calories and amount of protein thought to be required by an average man, translate these nutritional components into a standard diet and thence into the cost of purchasing such a diet. Yet the determination of the income needed to purchase minimum nutrition has always been a hazardous exercise.

In case of India, according to the Planning Commission, a person living in rural area who consumes less than 2400 calories per day or if his monthly expenditure is less than Rs.76/- per month according to 1979 – 80 prices or Rs.228 according to 1992-93 prices is said to be living below the Poverty Line. In urban area a person who consumes less than 2100 calories per day or if his monthly expenditure is less than Rs.88/- according to the 1979-80 prices or Rs.264/- according to the 1992-93 prices is said to be living below Poverty Line. According to the recommendations of the Suresh Tendulkar panel, the poverty line had been fixed at Rs 27 in rural areas and Rs 33 in urban areas in 2011-12. However these recommendations result in an increase in the below poverty line population which is estimated at 363 million in 2011-12, compared to the 270 million estimate based on the Tendulkar formula. What is actually means is that 29.5% of the India population lives below the poverty line as defined by the Rangarajan committee, as against 21.9% according to Tendulkar. The change is primarily observed in the urban areas where the Below Poverty Line population is projected to have increased a hundred percent doubling itself based on Rangarajan's estimates. So, based on the new measure, in 2011-12, 26.4% of the people living in urban areas were Below Poverty Line, compared to 35.1% in 2009-10.

The Hydra called 'Poverty' began with just one face 'dearth of Income' or the 'lack of ability to acquire.' But study based on this sole facet did not reveal the actual multi-dimensional multifaceted complex structure of its existence. It quickly adapted to the surroundings and had no problems defeating the attack on its known face called income. Simply speaking as soon as it encountered measures leading to people crossing the income poverty line it quickly grew two more heads, heads which revealed expressions of deprivation. And more the efforts undertaken to

reduce deprivation in like health or education it just added a few more deprivations in many dimensions. A general observation of the so – called poor reveals many interesting glimpses into the reality of life. Many times it has been found that a person is above the income - poverty line. i.e. he / she earns more than the Income Poverty standards set by the Indian planning commission. Thus taking into account the income parameter this individual is not poor.

However a close study of the allocation of his resources reveals is that major portion of this income is spent on alcohol, drugs etc. It never reaches his/ her family. Thus the people who are dependant upon him for their survival do not have access to health, education to say the least. The family i.e. the spouse and children, cannot enjoy good health due to the inability to afford nutritious food, The children are deprived of a good education,( formal education school/ college)They are probably deprived of the ability to nurture their talents or take training in alternative disciplines so as to enable them to earn better in future. They are deprived of their capability to function, capability to achieve.

The pertinent question then being is his family “poor” or “not poor”? Are they not deprived? So how then can we base our judgment on the dimension of income alone? Poverty today has evolved from being a unidimensional monster defined on the basis of income to a multidimensional intricate complicated mechanism. It is in fact a many faced monster which like the Hydra of Lerna simply grows two more faces when one is cut off. A phenomenon of poisonous breath so virulent that even her tracks are deadly.

Let us further explore the above example. Why hold the income earning individual responsible? He/ she has to function under conditions of extreme duress physically and mentally since trying to hold a job requires a lot of effort and then does not pay well. He / she has probably been deprived of the benefits of education / training which would enable him to earn better due to poverty in his childhood. Poverty as observed by many studies is transmitted from one generation to next. He / She may have been forced to enter the market at a very early age without any formal training “Child labor” exploited due to the forcing circumstances. He/she could also be a pushed migrant trying to settle into a new place, a new regime. Then again this individual might be suffering from frustration of not being able to earn more, depression of feeling that he will never be able to break out of this trap. Also there is the added logic which says anyway whatever I have earned is not

enough so then why not seek release from this mess which does not let me breath for a short time in the form of alcohol? All the above reasoning can be summarized under lacking the freedom of functioning in various dimensions.

“For each head cut off it grew two more — and poisonous breath so virulent even her tracks were deadly. Its lair was the lake of Lerna in the Argolid.”

Poverty as we try to understand today has various faces which can be analyzed for measures the dimensions of income, education, health, nutrition, shelter, clothing, access to information, degree of discrimination, social exclusion and the center face being freedom of capability of functioning. “Poverty may also be tied to a specific type of consumption; thus someone might be house poor or food poor or health poor. These dimensions of poverty can often be measured directly, for instance by measuring malnutrition or literacy.” (Introduction to Poverty Analysis World Bank Institute August 2005). Analyzing the various facets, we can safely say that being poor does not just mean having insufficient funds to spend on necessities. With the advent of Amartya Sen’s ‘Capability Approach’ the understanding of Poverty has broadened beyond meaning just income poverty, i.e. just money poor to being poor in all aspects life, viz being deprived from experiencing a rich full life terms of Societal Acceptance, Inclusion & free Interaction between all spheres of the society.

The broadest approach to well-being (and poverty) focuses on the “capability” of the individual to function in society. The poor lack key capabilities, and may have inadequate income or education, or be in poor health, or feel powerless, or lack political freedoms. (Introduction To Poverty Analysis World Bank Institute August 2005). The capability approach views poverty as a deprivation of these valuable freedoms and evaluates multidimensional poverty according to capabilities.

Deepa Narayan and others in their study ‘Voices of the Poor’ have observed that employment, dignity, safety, security, freedom of choice and ‘peace of mind’ were among the most important things valued by the poor. The importance of these ‘very valuable Freedoms’ has been underlined by Amartya Sen. He discusses the ‘people’s ability to go about without shame’, an attribute that has found its place in the current literature on social exclusion and inclusion. (‘Missing Dimensions of Poverty’)

As with the 'fiend of Argolid', 'poverty' resides on the periphery of the society on the outermost concentric circle whose rings are bound by the core called well-being. These concentric circles represent the various levels of societal inclusion. The outermost circle is inhabited by those who are deprived most of the ability to function. They suffer from lack of money, lack of facilities, lack of monetary benefits, of material wealth, decent living conditions, of acceptance by the society. They lack the freedom to take decisions as they are bound by the compulsions of doing whatever you can to survive.

Beneath the waters was an entrance to the Underworld, and the Hydra was its guardian.

Poverty here can be likened to the guardian of the gates of Hell. A scenario of frustration lead actions, depressions, inhuman conditions, no escape from the life sucking traps. Poverty is the trap which does not permit escape. Its victims are entangled in its "Vicious Circle" and squeezed to death. Poverty operates as a black-hole which sucks in generations and even a ray of hope is not permitted to escape.

Ruck and Staples (1994: 170) have pointed out that the chthonic creature's reaction was botanical: upon cutting off each of its heads he found that two grew back, an expression of the hopelessness of such a struggle. 'Once the hydra emerged, Hercules seized it. The monster was not so easily overcome, though, for it wound one of its coils around Hercules' foot and made it impossible for the hero to escape.'

The measures to reduce poverty have long been targeted on the basis of the basic necessities i.e. food, shelter and clothing which is calculated based on the national income level and the population. However, the poverty line or the poverty threshold of developing countries cannot be in any logical way compared to developed economies.

As observed by Erik Thorbecke in ' Multi-dimensional Poverty: Conceptual and Measurement Issues', "Some households are endowed with portfolios of attributes that keep them in a poverty trap under which they remain permanently (chronically) poor, while others with somewhat different portfolios move in and out of poverty or can escape altogether falling into a state of poverty" Also, poverty appears in differing forms in differing places. It shifts its shape and appearance as per the situation and the

circumstance. What may be required in the slum settlements of Mumbai may not be the solution for impoverished rural people or for the debt ridden, famine stricken farmers who are driven to suicide. The solution thus has to be tailored to the root cause. ‘The determination of threshold levels for the myriad of dimensions of poverty, besides being context-specific, is very much in the eyes of the beholders.’ (Multi-dimensional Poverty: Conceptual and Measurement Issues Erik Thorbecke Cornell University, USA) The fight against poverty has to be situation specific/ circumstance oriented & place ordered.

‘The Hydra of Lerna was killed by Heracles as one of his Twelve Labours. The weakness of the Hydra was that only one of its heads was immortal.’

The Hydra called poverty however still lives not just lives it gathers strength and how much ever the Heracles called government tries to cut off its heads it simply grows two more. Conquering this ever evolving, shape shifting many headed, invincible monster of so many faces will require a comprehensive effort to neutralize all the mortal heads i.e. those dimensions that are a derivative of the immortal head i.e. root cause (in case of India very likely over population); simultaneously with the basket of solutions picked according to the situation and then like Heracles bury the very ashes of the root cause after neutralizing it.

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