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A study of theoretical issues relating to poverty

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Abstract

Poverty is a complex phenomenon. It has multi-dimensional approaches. The existing theories poverty i.e. space time specialty, Human Development Index (HDI), Poverty line, Black Economy, are theories to measure poverty. All the theories give their different methods and courses to measure poverty in a country and it is concluded that no method to measure poverty provide and measure the actual poverty, as all the theories have their own limitations and drawbacks.

Keywords: Poverty, measurement of poverty, black economy, economic growth, economic development, functioning of the government, poverty line

Introductions

The existing theories, approaches and determinants of poverty, i.e., space time specificity, Human Development Index (HDI), Poverty line, Black Economy, Growth and Development are discussed in the present research. The poverty line and its limitation and drawbacks in measuring the correct number of the poor are dealt with. The research also deals with the determinants- (economic and non-economic) of poverty. The black economy and its impact on the functioning of the government and the difficulties that it causes in alleviating poverty and inequality in a country are some of the highlights of the research. The research also explains that the caste system has been a major hurdle for the lowly placed castes especially scheduled castes in their all-round development and smooth implementation of policy for their benefit.

Approaches to Defining Poverty

Poverty involves value judgments hence; the definitions of poverty are different and vary from being narrow to very broad. Nolan and Whelan (1996)^[44] defined poverty in terms of inability to participate in society. It is a broader definition than an absolute definition which is confined to subsistence needs. The concept of inability to participate refers to lack of resources. At times, this definition is confined to those areas of life where consumption or participation are determined primarily by command over financial resources (Veit-Wilson 1998)^[57]. A broader definition of poverty is given by United Nations which excludes non-material elements. According to this definition poverty is the lack of participation, a violation of human dignity, powerlessness and susceptibility to violence (Langmore 2000)^[29]. Such vital concepts are more of political nature and less of economic nature and are not measurable.

The main problem with defining poverty as capability failure is that it becomes impossible to separate poverty as conventionally understood from other conditions that serves to undermine capabilities, well-being or social qualities. Sen himself admitted that the perspective of capability, poverty does not involve any denial of the sensible view that low income is clearly a major factor in poverty. He further made it clear that lack of income can be a principal vision for capability deprivation of a person (Sen, 1996)^[52]. Thus, Sen simply defined poverty in a different mode which had low income level as its base. Hence, it can be said that poverty is a situation where people lack the economic resources to realize a set of basic functioning. This statement unites capability deprivation firmly to income poverty. Hence, Sen's notion of capability deprivation to the concept of poverty is a complement rather than a supplant to the conventional and resource- based definition.

In reality, it can be observed that all the definitions and concepts of poverty have been given under one or the other heads of the material conditions, economic circumstances or social positions. The concept of poverty is related to specific needs, standard of living or pattern of deprivation can be covered under material conditions.

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The concept related to lack of resources, economic distances or economic class can be covered under economic circumstances while, the concept of poverty related to the dependency, exclusion or lack of entitlement as given by Sen (1996)^[52] can be covered under the head of social position. However, the core of all these definitions is unacceptable hardship which the people have to face. The present study will take into consideration the narrow as well as wider concepts of poverty as both the concepts are relevant to study poverty amongst scheduled castes in the state of Haryana.

The present study also undertakes the concepts of absolute and relative poverty. Absolute poverty is a level of minimum needs below which people are regarded as poor for the purpose of social concerned, and which does not change over time (OECD 1976)^[47]. It is a condition characterized by severe deprivation of basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education and information (UN 1995)^[55]. Absolute poverty is generally understood as lack of sufficient money to meet basic physical needs. It is defined in terms of survival; more commonly it refers to subsistence, linked to a basic standard of physical capacity, necessary for the production and reproduction. Nutrition is central to this concept of poverty. An absolute standard means actual needs of the poor. In this respect, a family is poor if it cannot afford to eat (Joseph and Sumption 1979)^[16].

The entire study, so far, is that poverty may be need based, based on deprivation or based on patterns of deprivation. The need based concept is related to food, shelter, clothing and other basic necessities of life. Deprivation involves a lack of something generally held to be desirable- an adequate income or good health (Brown and Madge 1982)^[6]. Townsend defines deprivation in terms of disadvantage. Deprivation may be defined in a state of observable and demonstrable disadvantage relative to the local community to which an individual or family belongs (Townsend 1987)^[54]. However, there is a strong link between poverty and deprivation because poverty is related to lack of welfare, hardship and material needs.

The patterns of deprivation may refer to the conventional way of defining poverty which is described as a low standard or living. The International Labour Organization has also suggested the pattern of deprivation in this manner when it is stated that individuals or families are considered poor when their level of living measured in terms of income or consumption, is below a particular standard (ILO 1995)^[12]. The standard of living of the poor is so low that they struggle to obtain the necessities of life and make both ends meet (Charles Booth 1902)^[7].

All the three basis of poverty, mainly lack of basic needs, deprivation and pattern of deprivation should be taken into consideration in the present research study since they are relevant to explain the actual socio-economic conditions of poverty amongst scheduled castes.

Poverty line

Poverty line is a limit below which the people are considered poor. This line specifies the level of income and expenditure required to purchase a bundle of essential goods including food, clothing, water, schooling, electricity and healthcare. In fact, the definition of poverty has political aim and differs from a developed to a developing country. Any

definition related to poverty line has to incorporate the concept of family, cash income, treatment of taxes and regional differences in cost of living (Blank 1997 and Quigley 2003)^[1, 48]. However, the remedial measures can be taken only when we know the people for whom the policy of poverty eradication is to be applied. Consequently, different theoretical concepts of poverty have been examined by various thinkers and poverty line is one of the important concepts with which it is determined that a person is poor or not.

Dandekar (1990)^[9] has rightly remarked that a person is poor if he is living below a certain economic level of well-being. "Poverty is the proportion of the population living below a certain level of living called the poverty line." (Dandekar 1990)^[9].

It means that there is need to determine the poverty line to measure the extent of poverty. The simplest method of determining poverty line is a certain level of income or consumer expenditure necessary to meet the minimum needs of life.

It is easier to say that a certain level of income or consumption expenditure to fulfil the human needs determines the poverty line but, it is difficult to determine this certain level of income or expenditure. Researchers have observed that the change in assumptions about data collection and measurement methods can altogether change the level of poverty line from one country to another. It has been observed that the number of people below poverty line changed from 30 percent to 60 percent in Latin America once the assumptions under the measurement methods were changed. Moreover, it is not always true that person above a certain minimum level of income or expenditure will not be poor in case the necessities or comforts of life are not available in the region in which the person is living. Moreover, the lack of uniformity and the lack of purchasing power is also an important element which creates problems in accepting this method of poverty line determination.

Theories of Poverty

The root causes of poverty are explained by the theories of poverty. There are the following basic theories of poverty which try to explain the reasons for a person, termed as poor.

Individual Deficiencies

This theory of poverty provides a multi-faceted set of factors which explain that individuals themselves are responsible for their poverty situation. People try to maximize their own well-being by making choices and investment. When such choices are made, they themselves are responsible for the opportunities from which they could have taken most of the advantages, for example, an individual decision to forgo college education or other training would lead them not to get better paying jobs in future. It simply means a poor person cannot make efforts in the right direction due to poverty. However, this theory cannot be accepted uniformly since, a poor person born in a poor family cannot take decision when a person has little or no means to achieve ends.

Cultural Belief System

According to this theory poverty is created by the transmission of a set of beliefs, values and skills from generation to generation. This tendency is termed as the

culture of poverty. Such type of poverty is socially generated but held individually. Hence, an individual may not be blamed because they are victims of cultural poverty. Once, the culture of poverty comes into existence, it tends to perpetuate itself. The children living in slums get themselves absorbed in the basic attitudes and values of this culture of poverty. Consequently, they fail to take advantage of changing conditions or improving opportunities which may develop in their lifetime (Murray 1984) ^[42].

This theory of poverty which is based on the perpetual cultural values has also met with controversies. There is no doubt that poor people come from such a culture of poverty, yet, it is also a hard fact that most of the rich persons of today belong to the same culture of poverty. Hence, cultural belief cannot be considered as the root cause of poverty of a person.

Economic, Political and Social Discrimination

In this theory it is believed that discrimination is the root cause of poverty. It may be at economic, political or social level. It is believed that economic system in most of the countries is structured in such a manner that the poor remain poor regardless of how competent they may be (Jencks 1996) ^[13]. Low wages in poor families prevent the poor children to get better jobs. They are caught in a vicious circle in which poverty generates poverty. They fail to get a better job because of their lower level of skill and training (Tobil 1994) ^[53].

Social set up in a country may also be responsible for creating poverty. A country may be divided into different castes of people which may broadly be divided into higher and lower castes. It has been observed that the higher castes people, generally, exploit the people belong to lower castes and consequently, the poor people fail to get better job opportunities. Similarly, the lack of political will to uplift a poor is also responsible for the poverty of individuals in a country. The political system may fail to provide cheap and better education facilities to the poor and consequently, these people may not pursue higher education (Bradshaw 2006) ^[5].

This theory has its own limitations since; conditions have changed in most of the countries after their independence. Various programs have been initiated for the uplift of the poor. So far as economic discrimination is concerned, it is also not acceptable because no system debar the poor to get a higher salary or a better job. The process of gaining stronger rights for minorities is an ongoing one, for which there is a need of efforts to be made for a better policy of reforms and to change public attitude.

Human Development Index (HDI)

The concept of HDI was developed in 1990 by Mahbub ul Haq and Sir Richard Jolly. It has been used since then by the United Nations Development Programme in its annual Human Development Report. Sen described it however as a vulgar measure, because of its limitations, though accepting that it nonetheless focuses attention on wider aspects of development than the per capita income measure.

Human Development Index is a composite index which takes into consideration three dimensions of human development.

- Life expectancy at birth, as an index of population health and longevity.
- Knowledge and education, as measured by the adult literacy rate (with two-thirds weighting) and the

combined primary, secondary, and tertiary gross enrolment ratio (with one-third weighting).

- The standard of living, as measured by the natural logarithm of GDP per capita at purchasing power parity.

It is claimed, a standard means of measuring human development, a concept that, according to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), refers to the process of widening the options of persons, giving them greater opportunities for education, health care, income, employment, etc. The basic use of HDI is however to rank countries by level of human development which usually also implies to determine whether a country is a developed, developing, or underdeveloped country. HDI below 0.5 is considered to represent low development. Almost all countries in that category are located in Africa. HDI of 0.8 or more is considered to represent high development.

HDI is not free from the limits too as it shows ranks achieved by different countries on the basis of HDI index that, in fact, does not show the actual picture of the countries. For example, the country that gets First, may not be more developed than the countries that get second and third ranks. In other words, if we measure their development level with the help of some other indices, or if we include some other indicators of development or even if we give weights to these indicators differently, this ranking may be different. Therefore, all the countries cannot be given ranking in this way. Instead of giving ranking the countries should be given grades like A, B, C, D etc. HDI classifies only countries and does not pinpoint poverty in a country.

From the time HDI was created, it has been criticized in a number of ways. Critics argue that it adds little to the value of the individual measures of social development. It is useless for inter-temporal comparisons and difficult to interpret because the HDI for a country in a given year depends on the levels of, life expectancy or GDP per capita of other countries in that year.

It is argued that HDI rank does not fully capture poverty in the developing countries. The weight given to various indicators of human development in HDI has been based on western standards which cannot be appropriately applicable in the context of developing countries which have their peculiar features with them. It may also be pointed out that there are several other dimensions of human development which may be more important and relevant while measuring the development of a country which do not find mention in the HDI. It does not provide any indication whether it has led to any improvement in the quality of life of people in a country (Kumar 2002) ^[23].

HDI is based on the average of three indicators and does not give weight to any of them but all of them cannot be put at par. HDI does not take into consideration the caste difference in a country but in many countries caste difference has been a social problem and causes hurdle in human development. In India, scheduled castes people are backward. Their social status is lower than that of other people and they face discrimination in all the spheres of life. As a result of which their economic, educational and physical standard is also lower than that of other people. This index of measuring development or poverty has its own limitations as with development, environment pollution is increasing causing health problems and therefore we need to spend more for maintaining a good health.

Space Time Specificity

The concept of poverty is time and space specific. The minimum needs of a person differ from place to place and time to time. A person living in Kerala may have less minimum requirements as he needs fewer cloths, less food for energy and less other necessities as compared to the minimum requirements of a person living in Leh who may need more cloths to keep him warm, more food for more energy and a home in good condition. Poverty line differs across the country and at different times. A person living in Kerala may have different minimum requirements than that of a person living in Leh. Similarly, the minimum requirements of a person change from time to time with economic development of a country. In a less developed country the minimum requirements of a person are different from that of a person in developed country.

Measuring Poverty

Since poverty is a multi-faced problem hence, there is no single method to measure poverty. Extensive, Intensive and alternative approaches are generally used for its measurement, however, there is a standard measure of poverty which is commonly known as poverty line. It represents a threshold below which people are considered as poor. This line is used to estimate the numbers and the compositions of poor which is known as the headcount, a ratio between number of poor below poverty line and total number of population in a region/state or country.

Early efforts were made in India to determine this poverty line and to measure poverty with the help of consumption expenditure approach. Dandekar and Rath determined Rs 170 per year per capita expenditure in rural areas and Rs 271 per year in urban areas based on the prices of 1960-61 as the poverty line (Dandekar and Rath 1971) ^[8].

However, this concept of poverty cannot be easily accepted because, in addition to low income and inadequate consumption, poverty encompasses lack of education, poor health, malnutrition, inadequate skill and low human capabilities. When all these economic and non-economic factors are taken into consideration, only then an accurate and comprehensive picture of poverty can be obtained. Since, the inclusion of all these factors makes the concept difficult, the head count ratio is regarded as a practical measure of poverty in India (Kozel *et al.* 2003) ^[17].

It is generally believed that the definition of poverty is centred on the inability of a person to get adequate food and other basic necessities. Hence the main focus of poverty is on material deprivation or the failure of a person to command private resources. A person needs not only the basic amenities of life but also good housing condition, water, sanitation, electricity, education and infrastructure. It is difficult to include all these parameters to the concepts of poverty line, hence, there is need to develop a scientific approach towards the concepts of poverty which may or may not be around the analysis of income and expenditure based poverty measures.

World Health Organization (WHO) and Food & Agriculture Organization (FAO) have measured poverty threshold with the amount of calories per adult per day, however, this level of poverty also lack uniformity. While the minimum threshold was set as 2100 calories per person per day in Vietnam, it was set as 2400 calories in Senega, 2250 calories in Kenya, 2700 calories in Gambia and 2250 calories in India. (Dandekar and Rath 1971) ^[8]. The

differences arise because of age, weight, and gender & activity level. The relation is direct between weight and activity level. Hence, standard level of poverty threshold on the basis of calorie intake is difficult to determine.

There is another problem in taking poverty line as a measure of poverty since; it fails to explain the variations among the people who are just above or just below this line. The poverty line does not measure the severity of poverty and considers everyone below the poverty line at par. There is another limitation that if someone is earning a little more than poverty line income cannot be considered non-poor as it makes little difference in his standard of living. Similarly, if someone earns less than the poverty line income, is also considered just poor. Moreover, price deflator does not include services but one has to spend a lot of money on education, health, transport and other services.

Owing to all these limitations, the government of India appointed Lakdawala Committee 1993 and in the light of the recommendations of this committee, the poverty line was determined on the basis of per capita consumption level associated with commodity bundle that yielded a specified level of calories thought to be appropriate for rural and urban areas. This level was set at 2400 calories in rural and 2100 calories in urban areas taking an average of 2250 calories per capita per day.

It may be the level of income or consumption determining poverty line and used by planning commission used by poverty in India is a one-dimensional approach. Theoretically there are two approaches to measure the poverty namely, one-dimensional and multi-dimensional or inter-temporal poverty. One-dimensional approach is traditional while multi-dimensional to measure poverty is modern and complex. The former takes into consideration only one indicator that is income or expenditure while the other approach takes into consideration other factors also like education, health, family status etc. besides income. One-dimensional measurement is a narrow concept while multi-dimensional has wider scope related to the well-being based on space and time aspects.

Determinants of Poverty

There are four castes in India. But scheduled Castes are still considered as outcastes and remain impoverished, discriminated against and segregated. India is one of the world's largest democracies but the untouchables do not generally feel that they have been given fair treatment in spite of 65 years of its independence. Economic and Social conditions of SCs, as compared to other castes are still deplorable. Poverty is commonly defined as an unacceptable deprivation in well-being which encompasses a multitude of both economic and non-economic dimensions. Hence, the concept of poverty is difficult to define and quantify (Kozel *et al.* 2003) ^[17]. It may be determined by a number of determinants, which may be as follows-

Caste System

Caste and poverty status go hand in hand. They (Meenakshi *et al.* 2000) ^[38] were of the view that literature on poverty is rich but the estimates of poverty among scheduled castes for different states of India are rare. The purpose of their paper was to explore the factors associated with high rate of poverty in general and poverty among scheduled castes in particular. They used official poverty line as the measure of poverty. The head-count ratio method was used to estimate

poverty among scheduled castes (Meenakshi *et al.* 2000) [38]. Caste is a significant determinant of poverty is clear from this fact that the percentage of poor SC in Haryana is highest both in rural and urban areas as compared to upper castes and other backward classes. It proves that caste system plays a significant role in the determination of poverty, although, Constitution is against the caste system, yet poverty among SCs in Haryana is more than six times as compared to poverty among upper castes, both in rural and urban areas.

Gross Domestic Product

Over the past 200 years, increasing productivity of labour associated with industrial development coupled with moderating population growth has had a massive impact in raising standards of living and reducing poverty in advanced industrial societies (Moller 2003) [40]. Poverty or the wealth of a country can be measured by its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) or Gross National Income (GNI) per capita. It measures the value of goods and services which are produced in a country in one year. In case, GDP is rising then the change in GDP per capita depends upon the growth rate of population in a country. If growth rate of GDP is more than that of population, then GDP per capita is bound to increase which means reduction in the level of poverty. Hence, growth of GDP and reduction in poverty level are closely co-related. Hence, GDP per capita is a significant determinant of poverty. In most of the countries of the world, the person is considered to be living below the poverty line, if his income is less than US \$ 1 per day.

The basic needs can also be satisfied if a person has minimum earning. However, the satisfaction of these needs depends upon general price level also along with GDP per capita. Hence, GDP per capita can be considered as an effective determinant of poverty only if general price level is constant. Otherwise, if there is inflationary pressure then GDP per capita have its own limitations so far as its impact on poverty reduction is concerned.

Education

Inadequate education can be considered as a form of poverty because poverty is not only the absence of financial resources but it can also be considered as lack of capability to function effectively in a society.

Absolute poverty checks learning in the developing countries like India through poor health, nutrition and parental education. The spread of education can help reducing poverty. Educated people have more chances to get jobs and are more productive and therefore, earn more income which may help in the reduction of poverty. More and better education is helpful in the improvement of growth rate of a comparatively poor country, and consequently, greater economic opportunities are generated in the economy. Higher level of female education helps improving a situation of poor in the form of lower fertility, greater participation of women in the labour market and improved healthcare of children.

A comparative study of different states in India during the 10th plans reveals that low literacy rate and higher rate of poverty are inter-related. The literacy rate in Bihar during this plan was 28.5% while the poverty rate was 64% in rural and 67.2% in the urban areas. Similarly in Jharkhand, the literacy rate was 37.6% while poverty among SCs in rural areas was 57.9% and in urban areas 47.2%. On the other hand, in the economically better states, like Punjab and

Haryana, the literacy rate was 56.2% and 55.4% respectively, while poverty among SCs was 14.6% and 16.1% in rural and urban areas in Punjab while it was 26.8% and 33.4% in rural and urban areas respectively among SCs in Haryana.

The impact of education on the income is large and hence, poverty is lower in the States where literacy rate is high. Education can also contribute to productivity in peasant farming. More educated people get higher wages resulting high productivity. Hence, education can be considered as one of the significant determinants of poverty reduction in a country.

Development is associated with the expansion of educational system. The spread of education is directly linked to the increase in labour productivity that has historically contributed to the decline in poverty in industrial societies. Furthermore, by increasing the supply of skilled and professional workers, expanded education reduces the income gap between the skilled and unskilled (Moller 2003) [40].

Youth Population

Poverty is determined not only by the family income but also by a number of other non-economic determinants which include family size, age of householder, number of children below 18 years of age and so on. In case, family size is large, more members of family are below 18 and above 60 years, then poverty in such a family is bound to increase. It means youth population has direct impact on the reduction of poverty in a country. This poverty is between 18 to 60 years and is known as youth population (Lerman *et al.* 1988) [33]. In India, youth population since independence is on the increase; hence it has favourable impact on the reduction of poverty line in our country.

An old theme of research on income inequality is that a large youth population is associated with greater inequality because it represents both a dependent population and a labour reserve (often less skilled), and is expected to depress incomes at the bottom of the income distribution. Cross-national research has often demonstrated the predicted association between size of the youth population and income inequality. The same logic argues for a positive association between size of the youth population and poverty (Moller 2003) [40].

Economic Variables and Poverty

Macro variables like investment, technology, governance, black economy and fiscal policies are also closely related to the concept of poverty. The lack of investment is an important factor for the current backwardness of industrial and agricultural sectors in India. Investment is also required for improvement in research and development programs so that the rate of return in different productive sectors may increase. It is owing to paucity of investment that more jobs, especially for scheduled castes, are not being created.

Technological changes are required for a rapid rate of growth of jobs in the modern sectors, especially, service sector including construction, trade, transport, communication, electricity and storage. These sectors are employment oriented but due to poor technology, their productivity is low. Workers are paid low wages leading to a large reserve army of labour force. It further prevents wages from moving up and hence, poverty continues to prevail.

Good governance requires anticipation and planning ahead and this requires a long term view of the world situation. Such anticipation is expected from the leadership rather than the people of the country. A decline in the quality of leadership results in poor governance leading to continuing poverty among different states of India.

Governance is undermined by black economy. In case of poor governance, government policies remain on paper and fails to achieve the desired results. Policies fail whether at macro level, like planning, monetary policies and fiscal policies or at micro level like, education, health and public distribution system help in the growth of black economy, resulting in widening the gap between rich and poor and consequently, the poor people, especially belonging to scheduled castes, are adversely affected. The failure of policies due to growing black economy had led to difficulties in eliminating poverty and resulted in growing inequality (Kumar 1999)^[22].

Concluding Remarks

The impact of economic and non-economic factors on poverty of a person in a country changes as we move from one place to other of one country to another and it is also different at one point of time from the other. The black economy and its impact on the functioning of the government and the difficulties that it causes in alleviating poverty and inequality in a country should be understood and the negative impact of the black economy on the policy implementation should be minimized. The caste system has been a major hurdle in the economic and non-economic development of the scheduled castes in. Other determinants, including GDP, youth population, education, unemployment, de-industrialization, globalization, female labor force etc. have their own role to play in the determination and reduction of poverty in India.

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