

POVERTY AS A SOCIAL PROBLEM

- There has been poverty in all societies over a long period. However the 'extent' of poverty is more in some countries than others.
- Every society, affluent, has people who are poor.
- In the USA more than 25 million are said to live in poverty (12-15%).
- It was only in the 60s that there was recognition of the prevalence of poverty.
- A programme of 'War on Poverty' was then started in USA.
- In England, the Poor Law was passed in 1601 A.D.
- The law provided for the establishment of a workhouse to provide work to those who were without any means to meet their basic needs.
- The conditions and the pay in the workhouse were depressing. However, this can be said to be the beginning of the idea of public assistance to the poor.
- For example USA an affluent society has poverty too.
- But by and large these countries prosperous.
- In India however poverty is a major problem. Thus the concept of poverty is relative.
- It has been so much with us that not much attention has been paid to it.
- It was considered a normal aspect of any society.
- Till recently there has been little sense of social responsibility for dealing with poverty.
- On the other hand there has been a rationalisation of poverty.
- The poor were believed to be responsible for their own plight.
- Unemployment was considered a sign of laziness.
- The Karma theory suggested poverty was a consequence of wrongs or sins committed in earlier births.
- When poverty has been voluntary it has been praised by society.
- In such a case one cannot call it poverty per se because it is part of a saint's life style.
- Mahatma Gandhi lived in 'voluntary poverty'. So did the Buddha.
- This is different from involuntary poverty where the necessities of life are in very short supply.
- In recent times there has been an acceptance of poverty as a social problem.
- India with the coming of independence has made some efforts to raise the level of income of people living in poverty.
- In 1960 the concept of poverty line was emphasised by Dandekar & Rath (1971).

- Specific programmes of poverty alleviation were initiated in the 4th plan.

DEFINING POVERTY

- The approach to defining poverty has usually been in economic term – the levels of income, property and living standards.
- People are said to be poor when their income is such that it does not enable them to meet the basic needs such as food, shelter, and clothing.
- The concept of "poverty line" used both in India and USA fixed an income.
- If people fall below this line, they are considered to be poor.
- The poverty line is arbitrarily fixed, hence there can be questions about it.
- Nevertheless, it does provide one way of determining who the poor are.
- Sometimes, the word "pauperism" is used to denote extreme poverty.
- It describes a category of people who are unable to maintain themselves.
- It is no longer seen as purely an economic phenomenon.
- There are sociological, political, psychological and geographical reasons & attitudes or value systems that need to be considered to understand poverty.
- Not only of incomes but also self-respect & opportunities for social mobility and participation in many forms of decision-making.
- In dealing with poverty one is not only concerned with the income but also with the individual's political role, opportunities for his children and self-respect.
- Poverty is not only a condition of economic insufficiency; it is also social and political exclusion.
- Poverty is therefore to be seen not only merely in economic terms but also in its social and political aspects.
- It is also viewed as a level of living that is so low that it inhibits the physical, mental and social development of human personality.
- The poverty has been with human culture and civilisation since ages.
- In the process of evolution of human society there have been enormous developments in social organisation & technology.
- However the fruits of this progress have not been equally shared by all sections of society.
- Experts have two approaches –
 1. The nutritional approach – Here poverty is measured on the basis of minimum food requirements.

2. The relative deprivation approach – Here poverty is seen in terms of relative deprivation of a section of population against the predeveloped sections.

APPROACHES

- The major factor considered in measuring poverty is income.
- Later it has also been suggested that the actual intake of food should be the criteria.
- If an adult person is unable to have a certain number of calories (2,250) a day he is considered to be poor.
- The economic aspect usually involves the judgment of basic needs & is mentioned in terms of resources required to maintain health and physical efficiency.
- Such an approach is now being questioned. Among the basic needs are also include, education, security, leisure, recreation.
- When the resources commanded by average individuals are so low that patterns, customs and activities of the society, they are said to be living in poverty.
- Among the ideas which have an objective and dependable measurement of poverty is a concept of PQLI — (Physical quality of life index).
- The three indicators used in PQLI are life expectancy at age one, infant mortality and literacy.
- An index number is to be calculated for all countries based on the performance of each country in these areas.
- The worst performance would be designated by the in index number zero and the best performance by 100.
- In the 70s, the PQLI index for India was 43.
- According to Ojha persons who are below the poverty line have an intake of less than, 2,250 calories per capita per day.
- Dandekar and Rath (1971) have estimated the value of the calories (2,250) in terms of 1960-61 prices.
- They observe that there would be variation in the extent of rural and urban poverty in terms of financial index.
- Here they suggested that whereas the Planning Commission accepts Rs.20/- per capita per month or Rs.240/- per annum as the minimum desirable standard, it would not be fair to use this figure both for rural and urban areas.

ABSOLUTE POVERTY

- Absolute poverty refers to the inability of a person or a household to provide even the basic necessities of life.
- It refers to conditions of acute physical wants,starvation, malnutrition, want of clothing, want of shelter, total lack of medical care.
- At times “absolute poverty” is also called “subsistence poverty”, since it is based on an assessment of minimum subsistence requirement.
- Nutrition is measured by intake of calories and proteins, shelter by quality of dwelling and degree

of overcrowding, and the rate of infant mortality and the quality of medical facility.

- It is also suggested that one should go beyond the physical need and also include cultural needs— education, security, leisure and recreation.
- The nourishment needs of a farm labourer would be different from those of a clerk in an office.
- Similarly clothing requirements will also differ.
- If cultural needs are also included then measurements become more complex.

RELATIVE POVERTY

- As there are difficulties in accepting “absolute poverty” fully, another term “relative poverty” has been developed.
- Poverty according to this concept is to be measured according to standards of life at a given time and place.
- The idea is that standards of society can be changing standards.
- Definition of poverty should therefore be related to the needs and demands of changing societies.
- In 1960 those who had a per capita income of Rs.20/- or less per month in rural areas were considered to be below the poverty line.
- In 1990 those who have an income of less than Rs.122/- per month are considered to be below the poverty line.
- The term “relative poverty” also refers to the fact that different societies have different standards, hence it is not possible to have a universal measurement of poverty.
- Those who are considered poor in USA by their standards, may not be considered so in India.

STATUS OF POVERTY

- India has made progress in reducing extreme poverty, but many people still struggle to meet their basic needs.
- According to the World Bank, one in four Indians— over 35 crore people—live below the minimum level needed for a decent life.
- They still lack access to basic needs like nutritious food, safe housing, healthcare, and education.
- Official data shows that only 5% of Indians now live in extreme poverty, based on the \$3-per-day global benchmark (adjusted for purchasing power parity or PPP).
- But the World Bank says the \$3/day threshold is no longer appropriate for India’s stage of development.
- The relevant international poverty line for India today is the lower-middle-income (LMI) threshold of \$4.20 per person per day.
- India has not updated its official national poverty line since 2011–12.
- While new methods like the Modified Mixed Recall Period (MMRP) have helped capture higher household consumption, experts say this change also makes poverty estimates appear lower.

- India increasingly relies on global benchmarks and broader tools like the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), which looks at education, sanitation, electricity, housing, and other services
- MPI figures show that multidimensional poverty fell from 29% in 2013 to 11.3% in 2022.
- India's Gini Index—used to track income inequality—improved only modestly from 28.8 in 2011 to 25.5 in 2022. The top 1% of Indians now control over 40% of national wealth, while the bottom 50% own just 6.4%.
- In cities, high rents and fragile employment mean that even those above the poverty line live on the edge.
- In rural areas, land fragmentation and seasonal work keep incomes unstable. One medical emergency, job loss, or missed pay cheque can push families back into crisis.

CAUSES OF POVERTY

NEXUS BETWEEN INEQUALITY & POVERTY

- It has been suggested by a British social welfare expert that poverty should not be defined as income insufficiency, but the focus ought to be on the degree in inequality in the distribution of wealth in a society.
- Inequality is generated by the capitalist economy where wealth is concentrated in the hands of a few according to Marx
- These few gain control of the means of producing wealth such as slaves, land and capital.
- They are able to influence the political process, by which social inequality is managed.
- Essentially poverty boils down to this fact that some people are poor because others are rich.
- Since the rich have greater political power than the poor, the government policy tends to favour them
- Marx claimed that all history is a history of class conflict; hence the situation can change only when the poor have greater political influence
- There are others who believe that there are different roles to be performed by members of a society.
- Some roles required long training, (doctors, engineers, lawyers, physicists etc.) They get higher rewards from the society.
- Others like vegetable-sellers, sanitation workers, taxi-drivers, typists, receive lower rewards.

VICIOUS CIRCLE THEORY

- It argues that the poor are trapped in circumstances which make it difficult for them to escape poverty.
- The poor have inadequate diet which makes for low energy and hence poor performance in school and at work.
- Poor diet also makes them vulnerable to illness.
- They have poor housing and often have to go long distances for their work
- They cannot afford or are not allowed to stay near the place of work.

- The circumstances combine to make the poor continue to be in poverty.

GEOGRAPHICAL FACTORS

- Poverty is explained at times by the geographical conditions in which people live.
- The resources are scarce and people are unable to overcome the problems of lack of resources.
- The desert areas, the hill areas are good examples.
- In India, certain areas have been designated as drought-prone areas
- Neither of these theories by themselves can explain the totality of the phenomena of poverty.

SOCIAL REASONS

- Social Prejudices like Caste based discrimination – drags people into struggle against each other.
- Socio-economic boycotts on deprived sections — social backwardness & social stigmatization are the reason for poverty.

CONSEQUENCES OF POVERTY

- The structural or the vicious circle theory suggests that poor find it almost impossible to get out of the situation
- Poverty forces them to develop certain patterns of behaviour enabling them to survive the sordid conditions of poverty. This pattern has been termed 'Culture of poverty'.
- The concept was developed by an anthropologist, Oscar Lewis, based on his studies in Mexico.
- He suggests that the poor develop a culture of their own which is not part of the behaviour pattern or the value system of the society in which they live
- Lewis says that the poor tend to be socially isolated.
- Apart from the family, no matter what other group they belong, their outlook remains narrow.
- They do not relate themselves to total society in which they live or to the poor in other parts of the country.
- The individual who grows up in this culture has strong feelings of fatalism, helplessness, dependence and inferiority.
- Their orientation is to living in present, they hardly think of the future.
- In brief it can be said that the culture of poverty is both an adaptation and a reaction of the poor in the marginal position
- It is an effort to cope with the feeling of hopelessness and despair due to a realisation that it is almost impossible to achieve success according to values of the high societies.
- Their isolation also means lack of participation in the activities of the society-political, social and economic
- Children are socialised into such a culture and hence are not willing to make use of opportunities to improve themselves
- Lewis develops the concept on the basis of his studies in slum areas

CRITICISM ON CONCEPT OF CULTURE OF POVERTY

- Some feel that the poor do not participate not because of the culture that they have developed but because the larger society in a way prevents their full participation.
 - Participation in social institutions requires certain levels of resources which the poor do not have
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- It tends to put the blame on the poor for being poor, rather than holding the social system responsible
 - The culture of the poor is a consequence or a result of the poverty rather than the cause of poverty



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