

HOW DOES POVERTY AFFECT FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS: A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

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Poverty has been a part of the life of mankind throughout its history. It is one of the existential phenomena that confront humanity today. Poverty is described as the inability to attain the minimum standard of living, disadvantage compared to others in society and economic position in society. The anthropological view of poverty incorporates various social science disciplines as it seeks to explain the relationship between human behavior and the social environment as well as the relationships between human beings. Poverty in terms of economic deprivation leads to psychological distresses such as depression, anxiety and stress in the parents and ultimately dysfunction of the family. So, parental stress can directly affect the children as well. The stress of living in poverty and hardship can have a negative effect on relationships among the individuals in the family. The focus of this paper is on the impact of poverty on the relationship between individuals in the stone-crushing families of Balasan River Basin, Darjeeling district, West Bengal.

INTRODUCTION

Poverty is one of the existential phenomena that confront humanity today. It is a very pitiable human condition. It is a state of an unmet human need, which means that persons and families in poverty lack the goods and services needed to sustain and support life and the income to purchase the goods or services which would meet those needs. There are so many definitions of poverty depending on the context

and how it is discussed. Out of the many definitions that are available, a cluster of four meanings has been identified by UNDP International Poverty Centre. These clusters are: *Income-poverty* or its common proxy, consumption-poverty. When many, especially economists, use the word poverty they are referring to these measures. Poverty is what can be and has been measured, and measurement and comparisons provide endless scope for debate. *Material lack or want*- Besides income, this includes lack of or little wealth and lack or low quality of other assets such as shelter, clothing, furniture, personal means of transport, radios or television, and so on. This also tends to include no or poor access to services. *Capability deprivation*, referring to what we can or cannot do, can or cannot be. This meaning is derived from Amartya Sen, and it includes but goes beyond material lack or want to include human capabilities, for example, skills and physical abilities, and also self-respect in society. The fourth meaning takes a yet more broadly *multi-dimensional view* of deprivation, with material lack or want as only one of several mutually reinforcing dimensions. Analysed from the sociological perspective (which will, first of all, consider the gregarious nature of man because man is by nature a social being), we can define poverty in terms of the 'inability to participate in society' and a 'space of livelihood' which does not only portrays him or her as comfortable but that he or she has access to opportunities and capabilities to resources that will enable him or her to live meaningfully. 'Inability to participate owing to lack of resources' includes exclusion from decision-making because the belief in societies and communities where such definition hold is that 'without resources' you are not a 'being' to be reckoned with in any form which includes 'decision-making process and also some of the non-material aspects emphasized by people in poverty themselves, such as lack of voice, respect and self-esteem, isolation and humiliation. The next consideration that is germane to the study is how one comes into a poverty situation? There are various factors that account for the origin of poverty. Employment as one of the factors has an important effect on earnings and consequently poverty. Important factors include job loss, declines in earnings, reductions in wages or hours worked, and growth in low-wage sectors, lack of capability to secure employment, etc. Also, a number of household composition factors including having more children than one could cater for, teen parenthood, marital status, and female-headed households are highly correlated with income and poverty. In terms of household structure, households that have an adult with a health problem or disability which prevents them from working or which limits the kind or amount of work they can do are at heightened risk for economic

insecurity or **to** be in poverty. Poverty is also directly related to the concept of need. Human needs are somewhat insatiable yet every human tries albeit successfully and otherwise, to satisfy the seemingly 'insatiable' in their own ways. Of course human needs have an important bearing on determining if someone is poor or not because they are 'located at both the material hub and the relational or symbolic rim of the poverty wheel (Ademowo, 2014: 1-15).

Spicker defined poverty as a material concept that is based on the notion of the need, patterns of deprivation, and limited resources. He argued that poverty is 'lack of material goods and services', 'existence of deprivation' and 'circumstances in which people lack the income, wealth and resources to acquire or consume the things which they need'. Spicker further elucidated another concept of poverty - poverty as an economic circumstance. In this concept, he defined poverty in terms of standard of living, inequality, and economic position. The definition of poverty herein is akin to the most common measures of poverty – income, hence, one is poor if he/she has low income. Further, here, poverty is described as the inability to attain the minimum standard of living, disadvantage compared to others in society and economic position in society. The definition is analogous to the concept of relative poverty wherein the measure of being poor is based on the comparison to the majority of people in the society (Cerio, 2019: 33-52). The third concept of poverty according to Spicker is the social circumstances. Herein, he views poverty according to social class, dependency, lack of basic security, lack of entitlements and exclusion. Accordingly, the idea of poverty is not only on all people with low income but those who have low socioeconomic status, dependent on aids, living under struggle and vulnerable to social risk, lack of rights, and excluded from participation in the normal pattern of social life. This idea is similar to social exclusion as a definition of poverty. According to Dewde (2003), social exclusion is the inability to fully participate in society, caused by low income, unemployment, poor housing, and bad neighbors. The last concept of poverty is related to moral judgment. Here Spicker defined poverty as consisting of 'serious deprivation and people are held to be poor when their material circumstances are deemed to be morally unacceptable. There is also a vital relationship between wellbeing and poverty. Wellbeing is not just happiness; it is about capabilities and achievements. Livelihood is about the ways people make a living and how they live, hence poverty is often described as a state of reduced or limited livelihood opportunities (Ademowo, 2014: 1-15).). In India, the poverty estimates (% below poverty line) for the year 2011-12 shows that 21.9 per cent belong

to below poverty line, and in respect of West Bengal it is 20 per cent (Poverty estimation in India, 2013 cited in <https://www.prsindia.org/tags/poverty-line>).

Studies on poverty sociologically can be traced to the mid-1800s. In addition, Shildrick & Rucell (2015) claimed that understanding poverty through a sociological perspective focuses on the 'structure and organization of society and how this relates to social problems and individual lives. These prominent theorists include Marx and Engels' capitalism, Durkheim's functional necessities of social inequality, Weber's importance of power and prestige, and Comte's radical upheaval and change on society. Classic and contemporary theorists have developed multiple perspectives on how to understand poverty. These include liberal theories of poverty, the culture of poverty theory, structural theory, Marxist theory, conflict theory, vicious cycle theory, functionalist theory, the cycle of deprivation, and many others. Bradshaw (2007) grouped most of these theories into five: individual deficiency, cultural belief systems that support subcultures in poverty; political-economic distortions; geographical disparities, and cumulative and circumstance origin. The existing relevant theories include the structural theory of poverty which can also be classified as conflict theory, neoliberalism, world-systems perspective, and dependency theory. Structural explanation of poverty blames 'capitalism' in the existence and persistence of poverty on wider society or the government. The basic notion of the structural theory is that capitalism creates a condition that promotes poverty. According to the Marxist view, poverty is inevitable under capitalism and views all proletariat as poor and the bourgeoisie pays them low wages in order to maximize profit and hence, the proletariat suffer from false consciousness, thinking their wage is fair and reasonable. Theories such as the functionalist, the vicious cycle of poverty and the cycle of deprivation are some of the related theories which explain the societal causes of poverty. Functionalist explains poverty based on the function of the individual in the society. The vicious cycle and cycle of deprivation, on the other hand, contends the individualistic view of poverty and blames poverty on society. Both theories agree that those children who born into poverty had the same norms and values as a mainstream society (Cerio 2019, 33-52). In structural and situational theories, poverty is due to large-scale inequalities in social structures, such as race, gender, class and power. Structural barriers in society prevent certain families from having an equal share of education and labour market opportunities, economic growth, good health and well-being and income/resources. Families from poor backgrounds remain poor, not because of individual or cultural failings, but because social structures such as

education, access to healthcare and employment inhibit their chances of escaping poverty. For example, functionalist theories suggest that poverty performs a 'function' where poor families in low-paid work subsidise the affluent, and different roles in society have different levels of prestige or status (Stock *et. al.*, 2014: 1-115).

Interest in the culture of poverty gained momentum in the early 1960s when several anthropologists sought to investigate and define poverty as a distinct and separate entity. The 'culture of poverty' is a commonly contested theory of poverty. Oscar Lewis first coined this term in his book entitled "The Children of Sanchez" in 1961. Lewis suggested that behaviors and beliefs are learned in early childhood and can contribute to multigenerational poverty. Many of those living within a culture of poverty can also feel marginalized by the provision of services that are perceived to be irrelevant to their interests and needs. Lewis observed that by the time children were six or seven, the culture of poverty was so ingrained in them that they were more than likely to live the same impoverished lives as their parents. The "culture of poverty" school of thought ascribed personal characteristics to the cause of poverty in which poor people have a distinct set of behaviors that deviate from the social norm. These behaviors are unique to the lower classes and are passed down from generation to generation, thus perpetuating the culture of poverty. In contrast, the "class poverty" school of thought argued that the behaviors exhibited by the poor are adaptations to their impoverished environments that emerge from failures in the social, political, and economic structures of society. These scholars proposed that environmental factors cause adaptive behaviors which can be viewed as a subculture of poverty and that the poor hold values similar to those held by other segments of society. The advocates for the culture of poverty theory argue that poor people have values unique to themselves that differ from middle-class, and therefore the only way to change both values and behaviors is to change the poor person. Stein (1974) further validated the culture of poverty theory as proposed by Lewis, citing examples of learned behaviors of those living in poverty that are passed on from generation to generation. In contrast, the class poverty school of thought suggested that the behaviors of poor people are the result of social class and that their behaviors are adaptations to the environment in which they live, not a set of distinct values and attitudes. Whether one agrees with the culture of poverty or class poverty theories, it is obvious that the culture of poverty proposed by Lewis had a significant impact on anthropological views of poverty. The anthropological view of poverty incorporates various social science disciplines as it seeks to explain the relationship between human

behavior and the social environment as well as the relationships between human beings (Frere and Catherine 2007, 73-86). The stress of living in poverty and hardship can have a negative effect on relationships among the individuals in the family. Poverty can be found as a major obstacle that blocks the way of parents to perform their parental duties with full attention. The strain of having fewer resources available for day-to-day living causes parental psychological distresses. Thus, poverty in terms of economic deprivation leads to psychological distresses such as depression, anxiety and stress in the parents and ultimately dysfunction of the family. So, parental stress can directly affect the children as well. Thus, to understand the impact of poverty on the relationship between individuals in the family the present study has been done among the stone crushing families in the Balasan River basin of Darjeeling district, West Bengal. The study has been conducted on 250 stone crushing families which covered 1238 population of them males were 633 and females were 605; and the sex ratio was 956.

AREA UNDER STUDY

The area under study namely Purba Rangia village is located at Balasan River basin adjacent to Siliguri town and lies at the foothill region of the Himalayas. The River Balasan comes down from Himalayas with natural resources to a great extent like sands, stones, boulders etc. which are used as the raw materials for urban constructions and it emerged out as a prime earning source for the people working in the stone field. The stone-based work was of various types such as stone collection, sand gathering, stone crushing, truck loading etc. It is such a type of economic sector where monetary investment is not required but manual labour only. It is the fact that in spite of being paid little remuneration they accepted it as their prime source of earning because they had no other alternatives. All the studied families in the village are migrants. Due to some unavoidable circumstances, they were forced to leave their early place of residence, land and property. As a consequence, they became homeless, landless as well as resourceless. The Balasan River bed provided them the land to establish a new residence. It is surprising that a large number of them migrated from Bangladesh who belonged to Rajbanshi community, a chief scheduled caste of North Bengal.

IMPACT OF POVERTY ON RELATIONSHIP IN THE STUDIED FAMILIES

All the studied families were migrated and mostly came from Bangladesh. They came to the Balasan River basin in roofless, shelterless as well as resourceless situations.

All their properties and agricultural land were looted and grabbed by the Muslim people of Bangladesh and due to these facts, they were forced to come to the Balasan River basin for permanent settlement and earning. The Balasan River carries with its stream a huge amount of sand, stones and boulders and these are used for urban construction that has huge demand in this locality. It was the fact that to do the stone-based work only physical labour was needed and due to this fact this stone-based work was readily accepted by the studied families. They worked throughout the year paying no attention to the scorching heat of summer and the biting cold of winter. They did different kinds of stone-based activities like stone collection, stone crushing, sand gathering, and truck loading. They worked hard throughout the day but they earned very little as compared to their work amount. Their average monthly income was Rs. 2000/-. Due to little earnings, they could not manage their living. They had a crying need to augment their earnings for living but finding no other means most of the parents sent their children to the stone field. Hence, due to extreme poverty the children had to do this work from the very beginning. After resettlement, their prime need was to have a strong economic backbone but the present stone-crushing occupation could not provide the concerned security to them. Strong competition in the economic field, the struggle for survival and anxiety for the future were found among them. Another surprising matter was that in the working field most of the parents behaved like employers with their children that was a bad treatment for a child. The relationship among the family members was mostly based on economic performances that told upon their children's psychology atrociously. Ultimately the children were affected badly and they were robbed of their childhood. It is the fact that the securities of food, shelter, dress, education, health etc. were extremely lacking and insecure among the studied families of Purba Rangia village.

In their family, it was common to notice that the love, sympathy, affection, and kindness were almost absent in their families as their relationship mostly based on economic performance. In every family, the common noticeable matter was that there was a frequent conflict between husband and wife due to any small affairs in daily family life. Besides these, the drinking habits of fathers, as well as the inter-familial and intra-familial conflict, were also liable to make their families inhabitable that was a sign of a bad family environment that affected the little children very much. In most of the families, it was common to notice that the parents were aggressive in nature and the children were the worst sufferers due to their aggressive characters. As a consequence, the psychological development of the children got

affected very much. The feelings of love, affection, kindness, care etc. were almost absent among the parents rather the children of studied families were always provoked by their parents to do the work in the stone field. In fact, various types of psychological problems could be observed among working children such as depression, the problem of thinking and attention, aggressive behaviour and so on. Due to displacement and migration, they became poorer from poor. Their life became uncertain and also their solidarity and unity became lost, as a result, they became helpless. The whole system threatened their socio-political security. Due to migration and poverty, they could not celebrate all their community festivals. Many of them had a particular religious' places and even a common ground for festivals within their earlier village territory but these facilities were not available in the studied village. As a consequence, their religious life got affected badly and many of their festivals became stopped. They lost all their enjoyment and merriment and also the normal enjoyment of children got affected badly. In many cases the community festivals would not be celebrated due to poverty and migration. As a result, their enjoyment and merriment got hampered. Even owing to poverty and disturbance in family life they could not worship their household deities. Thus, their socio-religious life got affected seriously. Due to poverty and crisis in every aspect of their life the children could not participate in sports and games because they had to keep themselves busy with stone-based work during day time. The studied families were compelled to obstruct the enjoyment of their children. Moreover, most of the families had to take loans either from local *samity* or money lender for various purposes like house construction and repairing, marriage ceremony, treatment of ailments and diseases and so on resulted in they were deeply indebted and they never made themselves free from the net of debts. As a consequence, the various forms of disabilities and imbalance in family budget arose greatly which pushed them into a condition of near starvation.

Any conflict hampers peace and affects the normal way of living. It seriously affects the progress and development too as it creates tension which affects our thinking, working etc. However, among most of the studied families, the relationship between fathers and mothers was not in a good state at all. Even in some cases, parents failed to maintain a good relationship with their family members too. For not getting required food, dress, proper shelter, study materials, leisure time for enjoying etc., and also for inability to bear the expense of treatment etc. and other materials continuous unhappiness, chaos, conflict etc. were noticed among the children as well as other family members. Particularly due to the inability to provide

the above materials to the children and other family members the fathers had to go through a mental agony as in the family there was continuous chaos and conflict over this matter. To get relief from this situation many of them used to drink alcohol. A serious conflict and usage of abusive words could be noticed in every family when their father developed alcohol; a disturbance among the members at home and also with others used to take place. In this regard, the prime responsible factor was their continuous hard struggle against poverty for survival that kept them away from peaceful living. It was the fact that altogether their monthly income was too poor to provide the necessary livelihood requirements. The relationship among the family members was mostly based on economic performance that told upon their children's psychology badly. The majority of the children did not use to get proper care, guidance, love and affection from their parents and also from other elder members of the family.

The psychological health of the children got disturbed very much from the very beginning. They had to do many things against their will because some pressures imposed upon them. In this regard, working children like Prallad Barman, Sanjeeb Barman and others were the burning examples because they were suffering from serious psychological complexity. In their family, there was a frequent conflict between parents due to any small affairs. It was common to notice that the parents were aggressive in nature and the children were the worst sufferers due to the aggressive characters of parents. As a consequence, emotional as well as behavioural problems were developed among the children. They never got the love, care, affection, and guidance of their parents rather they were always provoked by their parents to do the work in the stone field. In fact, various types of psychological problems were observed among them such as depression, thinking problems, attention problems, emotional disorder, aggressive behaviour and so on. In this regard, working children like Babli Roy, Lalita Barman, Mithun Singha and Pinku Barman were suffering from serious psychological complexity caused by their poor socio-economic condition, family environment as well as surrounding environment too. They could not meet all their necessary needs due to their poor family earnings. Even, sometimes they were found in crying their eyes out to get what they want like good food; well dress; school uniforms; new shoes; sports materials viz. Cricket bat and ball, different playthings, football, sports shoes etc.; educational requirements like sufficient books, notebooks and private tuition etc., but their families could not afford to fulfill these requirements. As a result, too much anger on the family was developed among them.

Besides these, a regular conflict between their parents and often between families caused by any small affairs was observed during the study and at the time of conflict, parents used filthy words in presence of them. But it would be sounder when their fathers developed alcohol. As a result, they got these words by heart and it was noticed during study that Babli, Lalita, Mithun and Pinku also used those abusive words during the course of the conversation. However, this unpleasant home atmosphere had a negative impact on them.

GENERAL OBSERVATION

Due to displacement and migration, they became poorer from poor. Their life became uncertain and also their solidarity and unity became lost. The whole system threatened their socio-emotional security. In their families, the relationship was based on economic performance where the love, sympathy, affection, humanity, kindness was almost absent. Indeed, due to poverty and poor educational background, the parents could not take proper care and guidance of their children. Besides these, the drinking habit of the father created a serious problem in the family. It is such a type of family disease where the user is not only impaired but the other members of the family are also affected. However, this problem was common to notice in the studied families, where most of the fathers of children became habituated with taking alcohol every day in the evening. The alcoholism of fathers created chaos in the family because when their fathers became drunk, the other family members reacted against it with fear, despair, confusion and blame. They got aggressive when they were drunk. It seemed like a happening of sorrow upon sorrow. This made a bad family environment and lost their family peace, and their relationships got affected badly and also told upon their mental as well as emotional health. Under these circumstances, most of the children were feeling both emotionally and situationally helpless. It admits of no doubt such type of problem can rob a child from his childhood. In every family, it was common to notice that there was a frequent conflict between husband and wife due to any small affairs in daily family life. Moreover, the inter-familial and intra-familial conflicts were also liable to make their families inhabitable that created a bad environment. Ultimately, the family relationship was being affected badly due to poverty.

It is the fact that the relationship between parents and their children was based on economic performance. Most of the parents were aggressive in nature. Even most of the working children were scolded and often beaten up by their parents for absent from work. In the economic field, the struggle and competition were common

to observe among them. The drinking habit of the father had a bad impact on child psychology. Most of the fathers spent some rupees from their little earnings for taking alcohol daily. Often mothers were beaten up by their husbands when they reacted to it. Their husband became aggressive when they were drunk which was responsible to create a bad family environment and children were the worst sufferers because of the aggressive characters of father. As a result, emotional as well as behavioural problems were developed among their children. The continuous depression of parents might be responsible for developing a psychological problem among the children. Besides these, inter-familial and intra-familial conflicts had seriously affected the emotional health of the children. The confusion, fear and despair were developed into their mind. Thus, in most of the families, it was found that the parents were aggressive in nature and the children were the worst sufferers due to their aggressive characters. As a consequence, the psychological development of the children got affected badly. The feelings of love, affection, kindness, care etc. were almost absent among the parents rather they were always provoked by their parents to do the work in the stone field. In the economic field, the struggle and competition was common to observe among them. The ultimate result was the inability of parents to run the family with their own earnings. Therefore, the children had to contribute to their family income. In most of the cases in spite of willing, they could not eat meals more than twice a day. Even, their families failed to ensure a full feed. In many cases, they had to do the work in hungry. Ultimately various types of psychological problems could be observed among the children such as depression, the problem of thinking and attention, emotional disorder and aggressive behaviour and so on. Due to poverty and crisis in every aspect of their life the children could not participate in sports and games because they had too busy with stone-based work during day time. Thus, poverty may be considered as a key factor that had a serious negative impact on the relationships among the family members of the studied village.

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