

Humanizing the Poverty Discourse¹

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Abstract

The paper critiques the current poverty discourse for treating people as if they were livestock to be fed and sheltered to produce surplus for the elite. Even the view of physical subsistence needs in the current discourse overlooks essential needs of subsistence in the unfolding modern life. But more fundamentally, basic human urges for beauty, creativity and knowledge which humans pursue irrespective of their levels of income and are vital for subsistence as humans, are totally ignored. It is also argued that poverty is a relative concept, and that this concept needs to be deepened to mean denial of a legitimate share of modern civilization that also de-humanizes people. The paper also brings the question of participation in the forefront as a basic human urge by itself and also as a means of “living full” even in poverty insofar as millions of people will continue to die poor in the foreseeable future. Finally, the paper emphasises the need to promote positive values in poverty-alleviating work with a view to eradicating the ‘poverty of values’.

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In recent times poverty alleviation has become a very fashionable activity in development discourse, research and action. The "establishment" – i.e. national and international power and professional structures – view of poverty puts the "poor" under an externally conceived "poverty line" and professes to want to get them above this line by giving them some kind of a "subsistence kit". Years of effort pretensions and discourses by the establishments have done little toward promoting the professed objective. Their statistics sometimes show some nominal progress, but this statistics itself is blissfully ignorant of the unfolding reality of life: new threats to the subsistence of people arising out of drastic decline in the quality of certain vital requisites for existence, some of which are included in the "subsistence kit" only very shoddily and some are totally ignored, today dominate the character of this reality. It is not in dispute that services like medical care, education, law and order and legal redress of inhuman oppression of many kinds, vital for living with minimum honour and security of life, body and property, have declined drastically in quality in recent years, implying in effect a fall in real incomes of people in terms of their "purchasing power" vis-a-vis these very essential services for subsistence. This alone prompts one to wonder whether there is a difference between "poverty watchers" and human beings! But looking beyond subsistence one has more reason to feel uneasy with the conventional treatment of the question of poverty.

subsistence – of what?

Some quarters are conceptualizing poverty in terms of a "one-dollar-a-day" line – a shabby conception that does not merit discussion. The "poor" themselves have their own conception of what they lack and need most, about which poverty watchers seem to be blissfully ignorant: when more caring researchers have gone and asked the "poor" about their criteria for "poverty" and "ill-being": they have presented elements like

- lacking land, livestock, farm equipment, grinding mills etc.,
- bad housing,
- means to decently bury their dead,
- having to accept demeaning or low-status work,
- means to face crisis,
- and some such others elements.²

²The budget and the Poor, A Study commissioned by IDPAA, Proshika and conducted by Shamunnay. The University Press Ltd, p 52).

Other respondents might perhaps add, as necessities for simply *physical subsistence* in specific circumstances, elements like

- more serious medical care;
- old-age security;
- entitlement for women to safe transportation to and back from work-place;
- means to buy law-and-order for security of life honour and property, and to buy justice when violated;
- and such other obviously essential needs for subsistence.

However, perhaps more puzzling is the preoccupation of poverty watchers with means of **physical** subsistence alone however inadequate the criteria are in their own terms, as if people (the "poor") are "livestock" to be kept alive to produce milk eggs and flesh for the "non-poor". As if they are not the same breed as we ourselves are, *human* as we call ourselves!

The humans of pre-historic days, who were unquestionably "poor" by any standard of today, are known to have excelled in some of the fine arts (e.g. as evidenced by their arts on the cave walls and rock shelters) despite heavy preoccupation with physical subsistence. And to build modern life from out of the caves the human has shown not only his/her urge for coming out of the pressure for physical subsistence but also to continue to express oneself **creatively and aesthetically** – undoubtedly every significant human step 'forward' toward modern civilization has been a step not only to meet their needs for physical subsistence and move beyond this toward advanced consumerism but also to do all this with creativity and taste. At the same time, the **pursuit of knowledge**, to expand the frontiers of understanding of life society science and technology, to understand "*who I am*" in this universe, and to apply knowledge in creative acts, have also been a constant pursuit of humans. This is what, it seems, differentiates the *homo sepean* from other species³. To say only the obvious, in order to subsist as a **human being** one's brain (if not the "heart" as a transcendental entity) needs

³ "*In his experiments with creating life the Creator suddenly becomes quite daring when he comes to creating human beings. He does not confine the freedom of its soul. Outwardly the species is thrown naked, armourless and weak in all respects while its soul is freed to fly. Elated by the joy of this freedom it cries out: 'I shall do the impossible!', meaning I shall not accept that what has been happening all the time will continue to happen – what does not happen will also happen*".
(Tagore, 1947 ed. pp 320-321. Present author's translation)

nourishment and 'entitlements' as much as one's brawns, for pursuit of its own 'finer' missions like knowledge, beauty and creativity.

And as the cave dwellers have demonstrated, *there is no linear, "one-after-another" progression in engagement of human activity from physical/material to the 'finer' aspects of subsistence. Human activity in all ages has addressed both simultaneously. Often it has addressed both in the same activity organically satisfying both the urges together; often one has been traded off for the other according to unstandardized patterns of personal choices even under conditions of physical or material duress, e.g. deliberately sacrificing needed calories or medical treatment to devote scarce time and resources for pursuit of the finer urges of life.* And who are we, economists intellectuals or whoever, to dictate that people should first satisfy the 'basic material needs' neglecting the 'basic *human* needs' to be attended later (or not to be attended at all, for we seem to be satisfied if all the "poor" are merely brought above a "poverty line" dictated by the needs primarily of material subsistence and eager to certify that, therefore, very impressive 'development' has taken place!).

"hard core poverty"

A notion of "hard core poor" has also become very popular among poverty watchers. This is identified with persons acutely struggling for sheer physical survival. The need for urgent action to uplift such persons is undeniable. But even such persons are also *homo sepeans*, and there is a question of what Amartya Sen has called choice of the "mode of life" to which they should be entitled, not just entitlement to the basic means of physical survival. The poverty of a domestic sweeper crouching and creeping on the floor to sweep the dust fallen from the elite's shoes, or a rickshaw puller wasting his life dragging other people with his leg muscles, can never be alleviated by merely raising his/her income – there remains the question of a life of dignity and pursuit of the human urges of existence to which even the "hard core poor" must be entitled and **simultaneously**, for him or her, rather than as a remote hope of entitlement for one's children or grandchildren!

In asserting this we may refer to a dialogue the author once had with a group of landless rural labourers about how a drowning person not knowing how to

swim may be helped.⁴ The need for someone helping him/her out of water cannot be in dispute; but there are different ways of rescuing such a "hardest core case" – e.g. by lifting her out of water like a log, versus having her place one hand on the back of the rescuer and swim to shore with the other hand so that she has a role of her own in solving her problem. In the said dialogue there was a clear statement from the "poor" that no one likes to be helped by others like a log, and even in dire distress every human being wants the dignity of **participating** in the process of his/her own rescue or rehabilitation. The urge to participate, and in that process to advance in knowledge culture and creativity to express and fulfil oneself in whatever be one's calling or situation, is a basic urge of all humans however "poor" one may be. And this urge, as we have said above, is not a "second or third phase" urge in one's life – **it is an urge that is co-existent with the urge to survive physically**. And no external agent is entitled to prioritize these urges for anybody.

And finally, having built the foundation of human civilization the prehistoric cave-dweller who undoubtedly struggled to survive physically and died without adequate shelter and medical care has perhaps earned the courtesy by his/her creative and aesthetic pursuits to be asked of the minimum survival needs for his/her human soul as part of the measure of "hard core" poverty.

dialectical and holistic character of human needs

Social scientists trained in the positivist tradition see things as either black **or** white. But reality is dialectical, embodying opposites as co-existing dualities, of which at any time one face or a particular synthesis of the opposites may be dominant, and this persona of reality may change in response to specific circumstances or stimuli. The mix of material and human needs to which a person gives priority at any level of income entitlements and environment varies from person to person, community to community, circumstances to circumstances, historic age to historical age. Among the "poor" there exist beggars without much visible by way of a sense of dignity; there also exist persons who would eat from the garbage trash on the street but not beg, or steal or commit dacoity to survive - certainly more dignified (also challenging their creativity!) than begging. As it was for the ancient cave dwellers, there exist "poor" communities even

⁴ recounted in S.Tilakaratna, The Animator in Participatory Rural Development, International Labour Office, 1987, Window 1, p 4).

today who take their “poverty” as a way of life in its evolution, engaging in pursuits for physical as well as finer pursuits according to circumstances and their own priorities, and proud of themselves as a people notwithstanding their acute struggle for life (like the *adivasis* in the Bhoomi Sena movement in Maharashtra, India⁵ or the *tepitans* of Mexico)⁶. Many are influenced in their view of themselves by the dazzle of elite life around them and the *gaze* of the elite and poverty-watchers upon them; but the duality remains. And the opposite – a sense of self-pride and creative engagement to show what stuff they are made of notwithstanding their material poverty, are known to have been rekindled by appropriate stimuli⁷

Human needs and urges, furthermore, are *holistic* and not *cartesian*, simultaneously and organically embracing many dimensions both quantitative and qualitative. For both these reasons – dialectical and holistic character of human needs - notions of **poverty** and of **poverty alleviation** need to be reconceptualized if they are to serve and fulfil people and not master over them for the benefit primarily of the "masters", and also to get the best out of the people living, as they will live for long times to come, their lives of "poverty" in the modern world. And in the final analysis the conception must be that of the people themselves and not elite patrons/well-wishers of the people, for any social conception bestows **power** to the conceiver that may be misused.

poverty as denial of share of civilization

"the humanness of human beings is not in just subsisting⁸... civilization consists of transcending mere subsistence."

- Rabindranath Tagore (*Letters from Russia*)

It is still legitimate to present one's own conception as a contribution to a social dialogue toward articulation of such a notion of profound social

⁵ See de Silva *et al*, "Bhoomi Sena, A Struggle for People's Power", *Development Dialogue*, 1979:2.

⁶ Wolfgang Sachs, "Poor not Different", Paul Ekins & Manfred Neef (ed.) . *Real Life Economics*. Routledge 1992.

⁷ e.g. the blossoming of creative development actions in villages in Rangpur district and in other places in Bangladesh after liberation with a pride in one's collective identity rather than self-denigration as "poor" awaiting for poverty alleviation projects by others, See accounts reported in Md. Anisur Rahman, *Je Agun Jolechhilo, Muktijuddher Chetonar Shwatosphurto Prakash*, Gonopokashoni 1997. .

⁸ i.e. physically subsisting. It is the position of this paper that human beings do not subsist as humans with no finer pursuits. Civilization then consists of transcending a life where pressure for physical subsistence is acute. As Tagore went on to say subsequently, "*All the best fruits of civilization have blossomed in leisure. Hence it is necessary to preserve leisure in one part of human civilization*" (*Letters from Russia, loc.cit.*)

import. In doing this one may note, first, that the notion of poverty did not exist prior to differentiation of societies into the "rich" and the "poor". Hence poverty is a concept relative to affluence, and the "poor" relative to the "rich", as part of a co-existing duality. Indeed, one way to alleviate poverty would be to alleviate (relative) affluence. The sense of poverty one derives from relative deprivation in terms of entitlement to modern consumption standards is being aggravated by "globalization" which is bringing the whole world of affluence in constant full view of the "poor". **The notion of poverty, from the point of view of those viewers of global affluence who do not have a right to touch it, must be derived from a sense they naturally develop of wanting a legitimate share of this affluence – i.e. a share of 'modern civilization' which is claimed to be represented by this affluence.** A concern of the elite for poverty alleviation cannot be accepted as a mere 'humanitarian' pretence to see the "poor" somehow subsist with the elite chasing the moon; nor can "poverty alleviation" in such a "livestock" sense serve as a "safety net" against social unrest which is often aspired, with the 'animal' somehow helped to subsist and its surplus taken away to help in the elite's moon chase. A sense of relative deprivation of such increasingly high order inevitably reveals itself through kinds of conduct by the deprived which may be either or both of the following two types.

two types of `crimes`

A cursory look at household expenditure and behaviour patterns of people with low incomes in the neighbourhood or even below of the "poverty line" drawn by poverty watchers will reveal two different types of 'crime' by the "poor" in their bid to have a share of modern civilization.

One type of 'crime' is "**stealing**" from the "**subsistence kit**" that poverty watchers are granting the "poor" – it will be seen that these people *steal money* from this kit and spend it for items of "unauthorized" consumption – e.g. an elegant wearing outfit to visit friends and neighbours and receive guests; some little jewelry (at least imitation bangles); a watch and a radio if not a TV set; a second hand harmonium to help one's daughter learn Nazrul sangeet, a broken cricket bat to bid for inclusion in the World Cup team; family and social hospitality; participation in religious and social festivities; occasionally going to a movie or "jatra"; travel to visit relatives and even indulging in some sight seeing; buy and read books beyond the meagre entitlement provided in the subsistence kit for "education"; dowry for

daughter's marriage (however unethical the practice is); protection of life property and honour; the consideration the helpless mother seeks to buy from the invading mastans to take her daughter "one at a time because she is only ten"⁹; etc.

With lack of adequate means such 'criminal action' by otherwise honest people, of stealing from the "subsistence kit" to pay for "unauthorized consumption" results variously in sacrificing some or other of the "authorized consumption" items and/or incurring heavy debt and eventually losing assets in an attempt to simultaneously meet both. Obviously, if such 'honest thieves' are to be really helped to consume the full quota of calories etc. provided for them in the "subsistence kit" they need to be given a larger allowance to provide for the unauthorized "leakage" therefrom.

Those who do not see the reason for remaining 'honest' under these circumstances indulge in criminal action of the second type, i.e. **outright crimes by way of violence upon others** to claim their share of the affluence they see around them and on the TV screen thanks to modern technology, criminal action that we know has infected even the law-and-order services of the day. While human consumption urges may know no bounds and criminal action results from a desire to chase the moon as many among the affluent are indulging in, it may be suggested that the urge to have a reasonable share of modern civilization that is staring in one's eyes today as never before, motivates many-a-person to turn into a hijacker to snatch the purse or jewelry of a passer-by at dagger or gun-point.

We suggest that the concept of poverty as a humane as well as 'social safety net' notion be derived from a notion of giving to all a share of modern civilization instead of professing merely to condemn people to live the *unhuman* lives of livestock.

In a notional sense such a humane concept of poverty was implicitly articulated long ago by Rabindranath Tagore, who equated the very notion of development with every person progressively sharing not just (physical) subsistence but also what he called the 'full glory of humanhood', in the following words:

⁹ Abul Momen, "Isn't going to be the black age of history?" *Prothom Alo* 9.2.02

"One sign of a nation advancing in the road to development is that the insignificance of every person of that nation is progressively disappearing. To the extent possible everyone will gain the right to claim the full glory of humanhood. Everyone there will live in decent house, get decent education, eat well, clothe well, will be protected from diseases, and will have sufficient leisure and individuality. (Kalantar, Collected Works of Tagore, Vol 24, pp 313-14).

The difference between this notion of 'decent' living, and 'subsistence' ("insignificant") living, with which poverty watchers are preoccupied, is immediate.

How does one measure 'decent' education and eating and clothing "well"? Can a "poverty line" be drawn separating 'decency' or 'significant living' from 'insignificance'? It will perhaps be fruitless to enter into a debate on whether one should be entitled to graduate as a "non-poor", to the collected works of Shakespeare and Tagore or a recreation trip to Darjeeling; nor should it be desirable to seek to prescribe a precise minimum consumption kit for everybody denying one the right to choose from alternatives. But there can be a social consensus through social discourse on the broad level of aggregate income one should be entitled to as a minimum reasonable share of modern civilization, leaving the choices of specific directions of spending the income to the person concerned. The elite already have such a notion about themselves for income-tax purposes, in the **tax-exempt income** granted by the Finance Minister, who by thus granting obviously acknowledges that it is difficult for an **elite** to live below this line or unfair to ask one to do so. This "**poverty-line for the elite**" is also periodically reviewed and generally moved upward, following discourses between insiders and outsiders in the government/parliament among the elite, keeping in view the moving cost of living and world standard of elite consumption. Curiously, the same Finance Minister has a different "poverty-line" for the non-elite. One wonders why this dual standard. Shouldn't then the tax-exempt income be adopted as the "poverty-line" for all classes since the line already exists as a collective articulation of the vanguards of society as to the minimum income needs of its citizens?¹⁰

This is not to suggest, however, that all people should necessarily want to reach such a line in terms of their income. As already discussed, human

¹⁰ Such a "poverty-line" also lends itself to international comparison of persons below or above the line specific to each country giving its income tax exception limit.

beings do voluntarily opt for modes of life trading monetary income with non-monetary pleasures of life at any level of living, and there will be many who would want to be a school teacher, or a painter, or a singer, or even a hermit, earning less than a fair economic share of civilization but fulfilled in non-economic pursuits¹¹. While a choice of enjoying a fair economic share of civilization should be available to all, the goal of development must of course be to provide opportunities to all to pursue their preferred modes of life without economic strain.

With the best of intentions and efforts it will, of course, remain a long way for the general population of the society to reach anywhere near a "human poverty line" as stipulated above. (It remains a long way, of course, for the bulk of them to reach the "livestock" line for that matter.) But the goal will be a more worthy one to be set and to thrive for as a very concept of "development"(c.f. Tagore quoted above) in order for "development" to have a humane meaning for the general populace of the society. In particular in the age of "globalization" that we are being asked to be so excited about, the "livestock" poverty-line is consistent only with an ideology of the elite of society (and foreign investors) wanting to exploit the cheap labour of the masses keeping them as it envisages at a bare physical subsistence level, thus giving an altogether perverse, inhuman, meaning of "globalization".

One may surmise that once all the people in a society are thus given a share of civilization, which itself will shift upward as civilization (world standards of consumption and leisure) progresses, as the tax-exemption income limit does, `crimes' of both the above kinds - i.e. stealing one's own resources away from "prescribed" to "unprescribed" consumption, and violence upon others for augmenting one's entitlements - will be reduced considerably. The `social safety net' concept will also then become redundant.

die "poor", living full

However, for most societies this will take a long time to attain, and millions of "poor" will live and die "poor" in the meanwhile, at best with a hope that poverty only of their descendants may be alleviated in some distant future. There will, therefore, remain a serious question of keeping these people `engaged' with their lives even amidst their poverty, in order that they find some meaning of their life so as not degenerate into pursuits not becoming

¹¹ The author is grateful to Dr. Henk Molenaar of the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs for drawing his attention to this point.

of humans. The answer, I suggest, lies not in promises but **in the people having a role themselves in their lives that may give them some fulfillment even in their poverty.**

Some instances of such roles in the lives of the "poor" are:

- numerous initiatives by the peasantry in Bangladesh to mobilize themselves and advance their lives after independence. Of these the most outstanding was the self-reliance movement in 1973-74 in 60 villages in the district of Rangpur, committed to collective effort to promote village development rejecting all outside material assistance, addressing first the needs of their 'hard core poor', and rejecting even relief and the gruel kitchen during the 1974 flood and famine which hit this district the hardest taking the largest number of lives.¹²
- the *tepitans* of Mexico, who stiffened and rejected the term "poor" used by a western visitor to characterize them who was gazing down at their impressive self-mobilization to stand up from the ravages of an earthquake, and called themselves "not poor, but (proud) tepitans" (Sachs, *loc cit*);
- the profoundly enlightening experience the author of this paper gained when he visited the work of the Organization of Rural Associations for Progress (ORAP) in Matabeleland, Zimbabwe in 1987 and told the mobilized villagers that they were not poor but very rich in showing the world the path to development: he was profusely thanked by a villager involved in the movement "*for telling us that we are not poor*", as if a burden had been lifted from his broad shoulders which had been aching with the indignity of being labelled as "poor" as if he was someone "inferior" despite his proud role in community self-development.
- the people of *Barogram* near Dhaka who seem doomed to live with unspeakably polluted water flowing through their habitat with all the wastes of the metropolis which is draining their lives, with no assured solution to the problem in the lifetime of most of them. There is no point in promising "poverty-alleviation" to these people

¹² See "An Alternative to the Langarkhana", Rahman M. A.. *The Lost Moment, Dreams with a Nation born through Fire, Papers in the Political Economy of Bangladesh*, University Press Limited. Dhaka. 1993. Ch V: "The Potentials that were to Die". 173-175.

who have to accept their life as a "cursed" or "challenging" one depending on how one faces it. Their challenge is to seek a meaning in their fated life standing by each other in solidarity, facing the terrible odds of their life collectively, showing their worth as humans and dying gloriously fighting against the odds leaving their imprint on the pages of the country's history to inspire others to face life's odds with the same human spirit that fights all odds and passes on the torch when bidding good-bye.

Such a role in advancing or living their hard lives gallantly is "poverty alleviation" by itself, in terms both of progress when possible according to people's own priorities, and of enhancing their lives by way of tackling their problems in communal solidarity **thus fulfilling themselves** in creative engagement as **human beings** showing what stuff they are made of. Even in dire material poverty, and for that matter in any situation in which one may be placed in life (except in isolated prison cells), this fulfillment is possible if people have the space and power to become **the principal actors in their own lives**. And notwithstanding the pace at which this advances their material lives – for who are we to dictate others' choices - shouldn't such self-engagement by the people according to priorities by the people themselves be the most strategic element in a social thrust for poverty alleviation?

This does not negate the role of others to assist in the people's own efforts **to enhance the quality of their life with their own priorities**, which is what poverty alleviation must mean. On the contrary, those with structural power, resources, access to relevant knowledge or possessing relevant expertise have an immense lot to contribute toward empowering and assisting people, as friends and not as masters, to enhance their lives as the principal actors.

eradication of 'poverty of values'

In assisting for enhancement of people's lives care need to be taken to see that people's values are also enhanced toward desirable norms of civilized social life such as care for fellow humans, democracy, freedom of individuals within the framework of reciprocal rights, gender equality, rights of children, abuse of power and privileges, equity and social justice in sharing social wealth, submission to socially or communally determined procedures of law and justice, relation with nature and environment in a spirit of cohabitation and exchange rather than of plunder, etc. The ordinary

people have, or had, some of these values in their indigenous culture; in poverty alleviation work these ought to be invoked strengthened and advanced so that such work does not add to forces that are ravaging humankind and nature but strengthens forces that can transform society toward the good and healthy. Some values– e.g. gender equality and child rights – the people do not or may not have in desirable measures and need to be cultivated. All this implies some standard setting in poverty alleviating work toward which the author has reflected elsewhere.¹³ This, of course, applies to the elite as well, and poverty alleviating work must constantly strive to raise social awareness to eradicate such '**poverty of values**'.

Keyword: Poverty

¹³ Md. Anisur Rahman. *Globalization, the Emerging Ideology in the Popular Protests, and Grassroots Action Research*. Keynote address at the 5th world congress on Action Learning, Action Research & Process Management and 8th on Participatory Action Research at the University of Ballarat, Victoria, Australia. 10-13 September 2000. e-mail copy of this address is available from the author at <anisur@global-bd.net>