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PSYCHOLOGY OF POVERTY IN INDIA

by

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PSYCHOLOGY OF POVERTY IN INDIA

" Oh' Poverty! thou hath made me magnanimous,
Thou hath given me respect like Christ "

- thus goes on singing a romantic revolutionary poet¹ of pre-independent India. Perhaps the poet, late Kazi Nazrul, found in his personal living experience in poverty a challenge - the kind of which was talked by Toynbee, - which spurt him into activities of more humane and meaningful nature, free of prejudices and common human pettiness. The poet possibly found the absolute freedom in which there was nothing in the world to shackle him around: a sense of losslessness because he had nothing to lose, a sense of magnanimity because there was nothing that he cared to possess. A glorified poverty for a romantic poet! To a common hungry poor beggar on the street, however, the poverty does not usually bring 'Toynbee's' challenge or the poetic freedom. To him poverty is a painful living experience with shackles all around, - a tortuous process of living by day-to-day in order to survive. Thus, an earthy young revolutionary poet² of Post-independent India wrote:

" To a hungry man, the world around
him is utterly prosaic,
Even the full-moon appears to him
a well-cooked Chapathi "

The prospect of hunger and death every moment is too big for a poor man to take poverty as a challenge and be magnanimous! Yet, in almost all cases in India, a poor is poor simply because he is born (or made)

poor or because he is denied the opportunities by social and economic traditions - Neither is poverty self-making by the poor. It is against these inhuman socio-economic traditions of India, Tagore gave a call to the privileged class:

" Oh' my ill-fated countrymen!
Share the insult whom you have insulted
Whom you have deprived of the basic human rights! "

In the same vein, no less a person than Gandhi tried to uplift the poor downtrodden 'untouchables' by calling them 'harijan' or 'son of god'. He understood clearly that the only God for the poor man is a "bowl of rice". In fact, one can go on quoting pre-and post-independence national leaders of India, showing their concern for the poor (or poverty), poems and novels have been written by some deeply-concerned literateurs depicting the grim face of poverty, and in recent years many telling themes of poverty have been depicted in feature-films. But the fact remained: India persisted to be one of the poorest countries in the world where the scope and dimension of poverty is being continuously enlarged over the years to engulf a still larger mass of her population into its hungry embrace. The noted political scientists, Rajni Kothari summarised the situation succinctly:

'Men are flocking to the big cities for jobs only to be frustrated: The Finance Minister said in Lok Sabha that there were 22,000 applications for 50 vacancies for clerks in New Delhi office. The ratio is even larger for jobs in private firms. The problem is rendered more acute by the fact that the age composition of the unemployed and those with a very large body of young people finding themselves without means of livelihood. An estimated 40,000 Indians

live on selling blood in the big cities; the number of beggars on which statistics are available was more than a million in 1971. According to a detailed exercise carried out at the Indian School of Political Economy, about 40 per cent in rural and 50 per cent in urban areas are living below the 'poverty line' (the official definition of 'minimum desirable consumption' of Rs. 20 per capita per month) and the proportion will not change substantially in the next decade. In fact the condition of the lowest decile will decline further and in absolute numbers those living the minimum will be much higher than now, especially in urban areas. Meanwhile the total number of families and children born in them suffering from malnutrition is rising, with resulting physical incapacities and mental retardation. The picture of the poor that emerges from various studies is truly frightening: it is a picture of large families exhibiting physical and psychic abnormality, incapacity for sustained work even for a few hours, a pronounced inferiority complex and a tendency to deal with patterns of exploitation and coercion by directing them inwards against their own dependents, and a vicious cycle of parents inducting children into these characteristics of deprivation and degradation turning them into the same kind of adults where they grow up, and this seems to go on almost ad infinitum ". /below

Yet, perhaps not in such staggering magnitudes, poverty in India is not a new phenomenon. Like in any other society, poverty and poor, have been there in India since time immemorial. What is new, however, is the general concern with the problem of 'poverty', - the word we now hear almost every day in the speeches of political leaders and in radio broadcasts, we read in newspapers and academic journals. Poverty and welfare politics have become major policy issues and are important items in political campaigns. In the recent past, two most critical elections have been fought and won in India on a catchy slogan of "garibi-hatao" - the old promise of the Indian National Congress in a new garb. Even the present emergency and its concomitant 20-point programmes are being rationalised with emphasised concern

for poverty.

Whatever might be the impact of the renewed political pledge of 'geribi-hatao' on the real problem, it suddenly kindled academic interest on the subject of poverty in India. The most exhaustive and pioneering exercise in this field by the academics is by the economists, Dandekar and Rath⁴. Since then what has been earlier a mere casual concern for a few academics and mostly left to the imaginations of a few poets and novelists and to exhortations of political leaders and Marxist writers, poverty has become a focal concern of social scientists and policy-makers. One indication of the early insignificance of poverty as an area of social science research can be seen in the topical listings of social science journals in India. The lead given by Dandekar & Rath's study seems to have caught the fascination of the hitherto sleeping academic intellectuals of India and following the lead it is the economists among the social scientists who have so far deliberated most on the 'extremely combustible potentialities of this social reality' of poverty in India.⁵

Psychologists still remain in the fringe of the poverty-study and are yet to make an entry in a major way. Ironically, the pioneering study of Dandekar and Rath on poverty in India was initiated and financed by Ford Foundation - a foreign agency. Does it mean that the Indian academic intellectuals were insulated from the stark social reality and therefore incapable to respond initially to environmental demands? Do they always need a foreign expert to tell them where

the researchable problem lies and what is their academic responsibility? Do they need prodding and patronage from political leaders in order to study a vital problem of poverty in India? It would be intriguing to study the psychology of Indian academics in their evolution in taking sudden interest in the subject of poverty in India in 1970's. It is a surprise that it took the planners in India, dominated again by economists, almost two decades to understand the grim reality of Indian poverty. They noted:

".....Compulsion of the present situation dictates that the Fifth Plan should be so oriented as to speed up the process of removing poverty and fulfilling the peoples' expectations..... Removal of poverty over a reasonable period of time thus constitutes the key aim of the Fifth Plan"⁶.

Why this general lack of interest in the problem of poverty among the Indian social scientists including the economists? This is an important question, for, an honest answer to it would shed light on the psychological impact of poverty on a section of Indian population who could be deemed as the articulate mirror of India.

POVERTY: A HISTORICAL VIEW OF PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES

To get to the root of the answer, one must take account of more than a few centuries of Indian history. In other words, one has to understand the ethos of historical genesis of poverty in India. For centuries India has been influenced by what Redfield called Great Traditions⁸ in which classical Hinduism and Islamic religion

played a major role in evolving a social system. As part of the world view in the Great Tradition of India, there is a belief in the inherent, qualitative difference between people. These differences are based upon birth and fix ones' position in the social hierarchy. The stratified social order is usually believed to be divinely created. The tremendous emphasis given to the inherent and unchangeable qualities of the individual results in a relatively static system. In both Hindu and Islamic religious traditions, one major theme which pervades the social perception and justification of the hierarchical stratifications system is that high or low position is interrelated with prestige and power to a much larger degree than with wealth and comfort. Hierarchy as the basis of Hindu society appears continually throughout all writings, both secular and sacred. In the four categories of Hindu society, referred to by the term Varnas, the inferior position of the Shudra is constantly mentioned. Position in this system is totally ascribed and upward mobility is, ideally, conditional upon a rebirth cycle. An article of faith which reinforces the system is the emphasis on 'dharma' which requires each individual to perform the traditional occupational duties of his position to the best of his ability. It is possible for one of lowly status to bypass the cycle of rebirths through extreme devotion or piety, - an ideology based on assumption that, if one behaves correctly in this life, one's lot in the next one will be greatly improved. Such dogma makes for acceptance of the statusquo and helps society maintain control of the

statusquo and helps society maintain control of the behaviour of its members. Despite their relatively smaller number, the twice-born high-caste elites are given most attention in the classification system. At the lowest rung of the Varna system are the largest section of the pyramidal structure, the Shudras, whose major function in life is to provide services for the rest of the population. Shudra groups are typically domestic servants, litter bearers, water carriers and others. A fifth category of the population, not included in the 'Varna' system are the 'untouchables' or 'scheduled castes'. These groups are generally considered to be unclean or defiled by the nature of their traditional occupations. Wealth tends to follow higher social status. The inequities of the distribution system geared to an ascribed stratification system meant that a large proportion of production was siphoned off by the higher strata. This makes it likely that some segments of the population live at relatively high comfort levels while a very large proportion live at a marginal survival level. In this system, high-caste elite begin to make a basic distinction between themselves on the one hand and provides a moral justification among the elites for not viewing it as a social problem of major proportions on the other. As a result of negative value attached to worldly goods and property in Hindu World View as well as, perhaps due to personal feelings of guilt and pining for act of piety and devotion, almsgiving to the poor (particularly ascetic beggars) has become a ritual among the privileged elite class.

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Thus, Gore states:

"The Indian who gave alms or gave a charity did so not to meet the needs of the person who was being helped but to meet his own need for accumulating religious merit for doing atonement for his sinful deeds".⁹

Interestingly, Islamic traditions do not differ drastically from Hindu views in so far as poverty is concerned. In spite of the stated equality of all believers of Islam in the Koran, we find a hierarchical order based on supernaturally related values, such as kinship to the prophet, date of conversion and piety. There are several criteria which appear to be important in the Islamic secular stratification system. In the upper ranks, birth, education, bureaucratic control, military power, political influence and wealth are the individual's rank in the system. However, occupation is only one of the ways in which an individual's elite status may be evaluated, while for the non-elite, occupation is the basic determinant of status. In spite of the fact that the Koran justifies work, the ruling ideology gave the non-elite rationalization for their humble position. In the hierarchical order, there is a marginal group below the middle class (merchants and craftsmen) called scum "who know but food and sleep" and which consisted of outsiders and outcastes being dislocated from their social and occupational place and are forced to live by their wits. The group contained people identified as beggars, jugglers, vagrants, rogues and swindlers. Individuals in this group were condemned for their deceitful and lazy ways

and therefore their position at the bottom was justified. This condemnation of their activities did not take into account the fact that the sources of dislocation were beyond their control. Below this group were slaves. In the Koran we find mention of the poor and needy as a social category, but this is a very vague and unspecified category and it exists merely to give meaning to Zakhat, the compulsory almsgiving known as poor-due. The commitment to Zakhat in present day Islamic Society allows the maintenance of large number of beggars to the extent that beggars in Pakistan have gone on strike several times in recent years to a demand of a stated minimum donation according to the degree of deference shown by the beggar to the individuals solicited.¹⁰ A strikingly similar thing happened in India when the beggars in a state capital city organised a demonstration in 1972 demanding some minimum donation. In Islamic tradition then, as in Hindu tradition, the poor-exist only to allow the non-poor to fulfil sacred obligations and to achieve spiritual grace. In a later development of Sufism in Islamic tradition, ascetism in the sense of the denial of the value of worldly goods is emphasised to the same extent as Hinduism. The celebration of the higher value of spiritual well-being and the ennobling nature of poverty (note the first quotation of a poet in this article) is found in Sufism.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF ACADEMIC RESPONSE TO POVERTY PROBLEMS

It is thus clear from the foregoing discussion that poverty in India is more a religious problem rather than otherwise. Although the

demographic complexion of Indian poors have undergone some changes since independence, it still largely constitutes of the religion-determined low-caste low status people who mostly do menial labour and defiling activities, such as, landless labourer, scheduled castes and tribes, beggars, scavengers etc. Thus in the stratified society of India inequality is a question not merely of unequal distribution of resources, but of basic religious ideas and values. And Andre Beteille suggests that "in India undoubtedly there is greater acceptance than elsewhere of inequality among the upper and lower strata.¹¹ reinforced by the theory of 'Karma' and perpetuated by the vested elite interests of the upper-caste - the purveyors of the Great tradition or the codified world view of the society. The social scientists of modern India, be they economists or sociologists, or anthropologists or psychologists, are mainly drawn from the elite upper-caste of stratified society, whose attitudes and behaviour do not seem to have undergone radical change." To them poor seem to exist as a vague category in the stratification system validated by religious sanctions without question, which resulted in very little direct contact with the poor and therefore neglect even in their pursuits of knowledge and research. On the other hand, for the poor, besides the century-old weighty traditions have made them accept more readily the status-roles assigned to them by the dominant elite. It is therefore logical to expect a self-protective callousness among the elite intelligentsia - leading protagonists of change - who like a

typical middle-class mentality were none too concerned about what happened to the multitudes of poor people all around them. The recent arousal of interest among the social scientists, particularly, among the economists seem to me a purely selfish psychological response to the threat, - the threat characterised by the possibility of being out-of-fashion among the professionals and of losing politico-administrative patronage from within as well as from outside the country. On the other hand, unlike the academicians, the politicians and administrators see the imminent threat in the growing poverty in maintaining their own power-base and in achieving the professed developmental goals and therefore they respond, with varying levels of sincerity to the problems of poverty. Thus, it was either the Prime Minister Mrs Gandhi's "Garibi Hatao" slogan or her 20-point programmes or the initiative of Dr Douglas Ensminger of the Ford Foundation, which gave respectability of 'poverty-study' and set the fashion. Gaikwad rightly pointed out:

"On poverty and social change a study was done by Tarlok Singh, I.C.S. as early as in 1945.¹² How many contributions on the subject has come from social scientists?by and large, our social scientists do not like to initiate work on controversial subjects but wait for the clues from the politicians and administrators and western social scientists. And then we see a flood of researches done by Indian scientists who jump on the bandwagon."¹³

It is paradoxical that the Indian scholars with brahminical values are most vociferous for their rights of academic freedom and

individualism, often with explicit contempt for the bureaucratic and political elites, but do not find it hypocritical to wait for clues thrown by the same contemptuous bureaucrats and politicians. The only saving grace is: better late than never.

The main purpose of somewhat elaborate discussion above is an attempt to review the historical perspective of India's poverty and a broad generalised view of the societal response towards the problem of poverty. The basic premise here is that the behavioural response under poverty conditions is largely influenced or determined by the prevalent social norms and psychological make-up of India culture.¹⁴

Given the socio-cultural premise mentioned above, what kind of 'psychology of poverty' the social scientists in India portrayed, in their studies since 1970, when they at last had shown some interest in poverty problems? In both popular and academic writings about poverty, two major themes are emphasised: first, the causes of poverty and secondly, the allocation of resources to eradicate poverty. As mentioned earlier, economists among the social scientists have so far dominated this field of study. Apparently, these economic analyses of poverty do not shed much light into psychological dimension of poverty which is the theme of this article. On the other hand, hardly one comes across a psychological study of poverty by the Indian Social Scientists, specifically by the psychologists during the relevant period. The paucity of psychological studies of poverty by Indian social scientists is glaringly apparent in

a review¹⁵ done by the noted Indian psychologist, Prof. Durganand Sinha. In this review Sinha quoted 121 studies of which only 25 were authored by Indians relating to Indian situations including 6 of Sinha's own studies. Besides the fact that only 16 of the 25 studies referred by Sinha were published during the relevant period of 1970-75, many of these studies were not directly addressed to the problems of poverty as such but to some specific psychological dimension of human behaviour in general. More details of these studies by the Indian social scientists will be discussed later in this article. At this stage I may like to point out that in search of psychological studies of poverty in India one probably gets the idea of 'poverty of psychology' in India which incidentally could be the proper title of this article.

THE APPROACH TO STUDY OF PSYCHOLOGY OF POVERTY

What is then the 'psychology of poverty' in India? Before entering into this largely unstudied area, we may briefly narrow down our scope by defining poverty. Poverty is basically conceived here as a condition of material deprivation. At the outset, a distinction has to be made between a set of objective conditions of material deprivation and a set of subjective attitudes and beliefs related to material deprivation. In the stratified Indian Society, the discussion on subjective feeling of relative material deprivation may completely distort the picture from the grim reality of poverty.

For, given the religious sanctions of the stratification system, an extremely materially deprived poor Harijan may not feel the deprivation at all relative to a high-caste Brahmin. Similarly, a high-caste Brahmin may not suffer from subjective feeling of deprivation relative to a low-caste Harijan, although the Brahmin could be more materially deprived as compared to the Harijan. Although such subjective feeling of relative deprivation can have an impact on one's behaviour, in this article, we will be primarily concerned with the effects of objective set of material deprivation conditions and not the psychological consequences of perceived relative deprivation. Thus, we will be concerned with the psychological response of that segment of India's population whose objective (that is measurable) material deprivation condition is very close to or below the survival level.

The analysis of psychology of poverty, sets as its task the understanding of given behaviour patterns - within a specific group represented by the family or kin or caste or race or class. Thus, if one wants to understand the poverty situation in India psycho-analytically, considerable importance must be given to individual consciousness of poverty as it is experienced as well as group-consciousness. And we can call it "psychology of poverty" only when we can make definitive statements about the relationship between poverty and the behavioural traits of the poor. It must be understood clearly that the behaviour of the poor is affected by many non-

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material variables which are perhaps more important in affecting behaviour than is simple material deprivation. Another point which needs clarification relates to the nature of behavioural response of the poor: from short-term perspective of the individual this is mostly adapting, coping, rational and maximising response to the conditions of material deprivation and insecurity and therefore extremely functional. These behavioural responses then, do not, in end of themselves, help to perpetuate poverty and the plight of the poor nor do they present a moral threat to the rest of society.

In other words, the psychological effects of deprivation should not be construed as causes of poverty. Thus, while Lewis was strongly criticised for attributing a crippling ideology to the poor in his concept of the "culture and poverty", in which it was claimed that poverty beget poverty culture and induced behaviour which interfered with upward mobility, further perpetuating poverty conditions,¹⁶ his suggestions of various coping responses was extremely perceptive and important for Indian situations too.

STUDIES OF PSYCHOLOGICAL DIMENSION OF POVERTY

Now coming to the specific studies on the psychological dimension of poverty problems in India, Sinha suggested five interrelated behavioural dimensions:¹⁷

- (1) Cognitive dimensions including perceptual and linguistic skills,
- (2) Personality and motivational dimensions: (3) Personal style

including self-concept, success-failure orientation, time-perspective and coping behaviour of the individual, (4) Physical variables like nutritional deficiencies, sensorimotor and physiological factors necessary for the performance of any task; and (5) Problems of crime, delinquency and mental health. To these may be added a sixth dimension related to protest behaviour and aggression, - peaceful or violent - both at individual and at group level.

Motivations and Aspirations

It must be emphasised here that all the six behavioural dimensions mentioned above are interrelated and inter-laced in the sense that they form coping response-system of the poor to the conditions of deprivation, as caused, determined and reinforced by the socio-economic environment in which the poor lives. The major intervening variables in this coping behaviour is motivation to satisfy certain needs in order to reduce tension or frustration. Poverty, as defined in this article is the condition of material deprivation to the extent that there exist a large area of unsatisfied basic human needs, - food, shelter and security, - threatening the balance between life and death.

Since poverty in India is largely a phenomenon of historical process of social stratification system in which the poor has no control over the environment, the basic needs continue to remain unsatisfied producing constant frustration and tension. Psychologically,

therefore, behaviour of the poor, - cover or overt depending on the situations, - can be viewed basically as a tension-reduction process at a very elementary level of human-need satisfaction and more often than not the form of expression of behaviour take the shape of psychic-mechanisms due to social pressure. Pareek conceptualises the paradigm of poverty behaviour:

" Poverty can be viewed psychologically both as a structure and as a product (resulting behaviour) of a system. In other words, we can start by considering poverty as a structural component of a society, and observe motivation produced by such a structure and the kind of behaviour generated by such motivations by certain processes. The patterns of behaviour of a large number of persons would produce what has been called the culture of poverty. The conditions of poverty produce a specific pattern of motivation and through the relevant processes of socialization, the expectancy that can be called the frame of powerlessness. The specific motivational patterns and the expectancy of powerlessness produce behaviour seen among the culturally deprived people (the culture of poverty)...the important concept is that poverty is essentially a structural problem".¹⁸

The sense of helplessness and powerlessness of the poor can be understood correctly in relation to the effects of environment, that is the social structure which is violently hostile, not in relation to the biographies of unlucky individuals. The real explanation of why the poor are where they are is that they made a mistake of being born to the wrong parents, in the wrong section of the country, in the wrong racial or ethnic group. Once that mistake has been made, they are caught in a classic example of vicious circle for reasons beyond their

control. The only means of breaking this vicious circle that throws the poor back on himself is to restore to the other, because all the most decisive factors making for opportunity to break the circle are against him and controlled by others. Here is one of the most familiar forms of vicious circle of poverty:

The poor get sick more than anyone else in the society because they live in unhygienic conditions and with inadequate diets and medical care. When they are sick, they are sick longer than any other group in the society. Because they are sick more often and longer than anyone else, they lose wages and capacity to work. And because of this, they cannot pay for good housing, education, nutritious food or medical care.

This is only one example of the vicious circle. At any given point in the circle, their prospect is to move to an even lower level and to begin the cycle, round and round, toward even more suffering. He therefore cannot conceive of a life otherwise than in the form of a constant battle against exploitation, misery and hunger in order to merely survive, not as a result of a Marxist or any other idealistic analysis.

It is perhaps in the context Pareek conceptualises a paradigm of culture of poverty in which,

"poverty as a structural component produces a threefold motivational pattern characterised by low need for extension and high need for dependence."⁹

Pareek suggests that the process of socialization through child-rearing practices, family life, informal adolescent groups, gangs,

and other important sources of social influence play an important part in it. But in the absence of any conclusive empirical evidence in his study Pareek's paradigm of poverty-psychology remains merely a conceptual contention or a wise guess to the point of calculated kite-flying which may or may not be true. It was not shown by Pareek, for example, why and how the threefold motivational pattern - low n-achievement, low n-extension and high n-dependence, - could invariably be associated with poverty conditions. There are ample evidence that the same motivational patterns are equally present among a large section of non-poor too. Following the same argument, the behavioural manifestations of the poor as contended by Pareek, such as, disproportionate risk-taking (gambling tendency), interest in chance and not in control (fatalism), lack of interest in feedback, seeking company of friends instead of experts, lack of initiative, lack of regard for others (self-centered), lack of faith or trust (suspicious), lack of cooperation, avoidance (shifting responsibility and exaggeration of obstacles), fear of failure, seeking favour superiors, overconformity and counterdependence (aggressive rejection of authority), - could also be found with almost equal strengths among the people who did not suffer from material deprivation. One may argue that these behavioural manifestations occur more frequently in poverty conditions and it is precisely this point which needs to be proved with empirical evidence, failing which it remains a mere hypothesis to be taken up hopefully by the psychologists for rigorous study.¹⁹

But Pareek's hypothetical paradigm of psychology of poverty culture does not seem to be as tenuous as it is made to look like. There are some empirical evidence to support it. Rath,²⁰ for example, not only reported significantly low aspiration levels of income, occupation and education for tribal students in comparison to those of higher castes, but there was very high and significantly positive correlations between very low educational, economic, and job aspirations of the parents and their school-going children of the low caste and tribal groups. Rath further suggested that "aspirations of children are nothing of their parents".²¹ With low motivation, teaching and learning situations become dull, children finding increasing difficulty in coping with the school and tend to drop out. He points out that, "as there is no push from home and no pull from the school the child adopts the normal behaviour of escape from such a painful and constrained situation." In another study, Gokulnathan and Mehta, though finding no clearcut difference in other groups, observed that the urban non-tribal group boys with high SES showed significantly greater Achievement than boys with middle and low SES.²² On almost similar line, Moulik observed in relation to poor tribals:

"Contrary to existing scientific observations, I have found that even those tribal people with high need for achievement have either mostly irrationally low or in some cases irrationally high aspirations. In this I find the element of extreme fatalism and extreme frustration..... either they are pampered by a corrupting paternalism to the extent of making them extremely dependent on outside agencies....."23

Similarly, Sinha, in a number of studies of economically backward villagers observed that they were overwhelmingly concerned with immediate needs or at times construed their hopes and aspirations in fanciful and unrealistic terms.²⁴ The general pattern displayed by them was of extreme caution, absence of risk-taking, and stagnant aspiration. Sinha concluded that there was among the economically backward villagers a lowering of expectancy in viewing the future even though the country as a whole had shown certain degree of prosperity.

Fatalism and Inferiority Complex:

Some of the most frequently mentioned psychological traits of the poor are fatalism and inferiority complex which are inextricably linked with the distorted motivation and aspirations as discussed above.

The extremely hostile environment of deprivation is constructed by the social structure in such a way so as to destroy aspiration and make the poor impervious to hope. If statistics and psychology can measure a feeling as delicate as loneliness, and powerlessness of the poor, one can see how their horizon has become more and more restricted in which they see one another completely alienated from the happenings of the outside world - not belonging to and not being cared by anybody or anything. In Galbraithian terms, this is an insular poverty of being economically and politically obsolete.²⁵

Talking about 'poverty syndrome' among the depressed tribes of Ranchi area of Bihar, Bogaert observed:

"Central to the syndrome is the conviction held by the people that they have no longer control over their own destiny. This attitude is evinced by a fatalistic indifference towards the future. The community orients itself towards the past, a past that is drawn more golden than it ever has been, and sees the future as dark. Whether partly due to the syndrome or not, the fact is that the tribal people have not profitted notably by the major changes made, new dams built. The tribal people look on as spectators rather than actors in the changes that take place. An expression one often hears is: "Ka Karab?" What can we do about it all? meaning: we can't do anything".²⁶

Two more telling descriptions of poverty condition will reveal the hopeless fatalism of Indian poor more poignantly than any psychological study:

"Like dark gloomy clouds hanging over a haunted city, the breath of death hovers above the residents of Shantinagar. But unaffected and resigned to their fate, they hang on to life as long as they are spared, for, even if they cry for help, there is none to hear. The living dead heave a sigh of relief, tragic though it is, with the passing of their dear ones, because there will be a few more less in the hovel and more room for the rest....."²⁷

Here is a story of bonded labour Chumilal of a Madhya Pradesh village:

"Chamar by caste, Chumilal has been Giridharis' (sarpanch) hali for the past two years. For the first year he received Rs.60 per month. He leaves for the field at four in the morning and returns at ten in the night. It is his fate, Chumilal explains. He took a loan of Rs.700, at 24 per cent interest per annum. and now his total debts stand at Rs.1,500/-. Girdhari now pays him Rs.90 per month. Chumilal is landless. He has put his wife's gold and utensils in mortgage. He has to support a family of ten. So his debt will linger and perhaps further grow.....When asked if he would like to stoop serving as a hali, he smiles nervously. He must repay his debt. "After all", the sarpanch

explains, "What can he do? He would starve. Halis have been here and will always be here". Chunilal shakes his head vigorously in agreement. Chunilal's father was a hali."²⁸

But the irony is that this fatalistic behaviour of the poor is a learned experience from the environment over a period of time. Time and again the poor has found that all his attempts to become independent and controller of his own fate are more likely to be frustrated and punished in the given socio-economic structure. One of countless examples of such situation is the story of Mehtab Singh - a hali from Madhya Pradesh village:

"A cobweb of wrinkles surround his eyes and his fingers twitch nervously. The gestures that come naturally to Mehtab Singh are folded hands, lowered hali for 20 years, on Ratanlal's land, to repay a loan of Rs.300. Disgruntled a few months back Mehtab struck work. On the night before Diwali, Ratanlal's two sons accosted Mehtab and assaulted him. Mehtab fled, leaving behind his wife and children. When he reached Ratlam it was morning. There he filed a petition to the Chief Minister. Since then he has not returned to his village. In the village in the meanwhile, Mehtab's wife has been forced to share Ratanlal's bed. Mehtab uncovers his shoulder, shows his bruises and begins to weep."²⁹

The net result of such hopeless fatalism is the psychological phenomenon characterised by Anthony Wallace as "internal cognitive manipulation", in the sense that "physical or mental effort is designed to bring into perception evidence which will justify the cognitive resetting of real identity as a more desirable state."³⁰ This means the resigned acceptance of the status quo of low status and material deprivation reinforced by the religious sanction of 'dharma' and

"karma". In other words, what it means for the poor is the immediate recognition and acceptance of social and economic realities and his identity vis-a-vis the social system. Thus the self-esteem of the poor gets eroded and he makes himself feel inferior. Rather the truth is that he is made inferior. So Rath and Sircar found lower caste adults having very low self-esteem about themselves compared with their own esteem for higher caste groups.³¹ In a recent study, one of the poorest tribal groups of India, the Warlis, were found to have strong religious belief "that God created them last as the lowest tribe."³² Berman in his study of casual and hali labour in South Gujarat made similar conclusions:

".....their insight into their own situation and into the factors that determine that situation is often extremely sharp, but just as real to them is the recognition of the fact that there is barely any way out. Their living from day-to-day excludes the possibility of any definite future perspective,"

and Berman continues still further:

"Behaviour which is not really independent or based on social consciousness reflects the unfettered existence of the pauper. Docility is more apparent in those people employed on a semipermanent and particularistic basis in the formal and informal sectors.....It would be all too easy to conclude from this display of subservience that there exists a culture of poverty and that people internalise their dependency".³³

Thus, if there is an inferiority complex among the poor, it is the outcome of a double process: primarily economic; subsequently the internalization or, better, the epidermalization - of this inferiority.

Socialization and Cognitive Development:

The process of socialization is considered to be ^{an} important variable in determining later development of human behaviour, particularly cognitive aspects of linguistic and intellectual development. Psychoanalysts cling to the concept of the family as a "psychic circumstance and object", in the sense that family is thought to represent in effect, a certain fashion in which the world presents itself to the child - a conditioning process of learning behaviour. In other words, the characteristics of the family and therefore the socialization process are projected on to the social environment. In fact poor socialization and weak family structure are often claimed to be responsible for the 'inadequate' behaviour of the poor.³⁴ Unfortunately, Indian psychologists seem to completely neglect this area of study, thinking perhaps that this is the exclusive field of sociologists and anthropologists. There are, however, a large number of descriptions of life styles of the culturally depressed and disadvantaged groups in India by anthropologists and ethnographers (both Indian and foreign scholars).³⁵ What is missing is the psychologist interpretations of the socialization process as revealed in these descriptions of life styles of the poor.

Simply to give an example, an attempt here is made to interpret psychologically the socialization process of the poor as described in a few studies. Here the assumption is that the adaptive behaviour to poverty are commonly associated with the ecosystem or

the class position which forms the ecosystem in modern society. Breman, for example, observed the privileged permanent worker in the formal sector that as compared to the privileged permanent worker in the formal sector, the household of a casual labour in South Gujarat was conducted in a more haphazard manner with a continuous chain of major or minor crises, and the working members of the household do heavy, low-prestige labour which was not bound to a fixed time and place and therefore no regular contacts with the other people in the place where they might be staying. But not all the varieties of casual labours are not cut adrift from the society. In fact, most of them have a fixed place of residence, in which family members still maintain contact with one another, be it minimal and bound by fixed limits. All of these labour categories live among one another housed in countless 'pockets' dispersed throughout the urban area or situated on the outskirts of towns and villages. Mutual relationships vary in intensity and are determined partly by locality, partly by caste. In order to maximise cash earning and chances of survival, both men, women and often children have to work and migrate to distant places resulting often long absence of parents (particularly father and mother) from house and causing neglect to their own children. Breman concludes that "casual labourers have the reputation of being insolent and illmannered and of behaving indifferently. It is the unpropriety of people who cannot be compelled to conform". Flexibility in the life-style is the

rule followed by these casual labourers in order to survive and maximise cash earning.

Pawning and utilization of second-hand goods are other means of maximising cash income, particularly among the urban poor. Kishan Babu,³⁶ a Calcutta street sleeper, for example, tries to retain possession of his wife's single gold earring because this is the one item of value which he can give to his creditor when additional merchandise is needed. The same observer of Calcutta street sleepers states that several families supported themselves by acquiring stainless steel pots on credit and then carrying them from door to door to exchange for old clothes. The clothes in turn were used by the families directly or sold to a wholesaler. The cash acquired barely paid for the family food and repayment of the supplier.

The adaptive response in terms of maximising the chances of survival is also found in terms of consumption patterns. The poor tribes of Dharampur (South Gujarat), for example, eat whatever is readily available from the jungle during the 'time belong hungry' (some summer and some parts of winter), including a poisonous root which knock them off unconscious of hunger for a period.³⁷

The materially deprived are believed to have developed particular modes of behaviour and attitudes towards children. Berman, for example, observed among his sample of casual labourers in South Gujarat:

"The attitude to education is not negative as such. They even try to find all sorts of excuses for not sending their children to school - no money for clothes and books, the school is too far away, the older children must take care of the younger ones, the irregularity of their way of life, and so on - but on the other hand they seriously doubt the usefulness of an education when this can provide no definite social betterment".³⁸

Survival necessity is an additional factor in the early initiation of children of the poor into adulthood. Children who remain children require maintenance. Again it was observed among the poorest tribes of Dharampur³⁹ that the children are trained in useful skills to help parents in their subsistence activities at a very early stage of 5-6 years of age. The tribal child really starts helping parents in all kinds of economic activities after he or she reaches 10-12 years. A long period of formal "education with long term potential benefits is always secondary to short term subsistence needs for survival". Therefore it might be argued that this pattern of initiation is an early training for independence rather than neglect; for, if the poor's children do not learn to take care of themselves most of the time then their chances of survival would be that much lessened. One therefore finds school drop-out rate among the poor relatively high. The independence training of the children among the poor do not occur merely in terms of income-earning or economic activities, but also in terms of sexual life (early marriage is common among the poor) - as a totality of adulthood initiation process.

One other factor which importantly affects the socialization process among the poor is the phenomenon called sanskritisation. The poor is comparison and he is constantly preoccupied with self-evaluation and with the ego-ideal whenever he comes into contact with someone else. The examples of sanskritisation process is abound among the low-caste poor people of India. The process of sanskritisation essentially starts with some material improvement in the deprivation condition occasionally facilitated by legislations. Those who achieve, by chance or by their own efforts, some success in achieving higher education, better economic condition, often tries to hide their identity by renouncing the backwardness and inferiority of their own house environment and life style and thereby claiming another (that of high caste) style of life. Breman provided excellent examples of this process of sanskritisation in his sample of low-caste poor casual labours of South Gujarat.⁴⁰ In other words, the poor individual who climbs up educationally or economically into society - non-poor highcaste and therefore superior - tends to reject his identity and family - poor low caste and therefore inferior - on the plane of imagination, in accord with the childhood socialization process, - a conscious attempt to regain the self-esteem.

That the kind of socialization process in life style of the poor as described above will adversely affect the Cognitive development is obvious. Sinha and Shukla, for example, observed children

from orphanages suffering from familial deprivation to be significantly lower than normal children of comparable age and intelligence on tasks requiring interpretation of pictorial depth cues.⁴¹ Das on the basis of a series of studies has reported that in India, high caste and economic prosperity independently enhance cognitive competence.⁴²

Das and Sinha observed the detrimental influence of both caste status and poverty on the performance of a series of cognitive tasks. The rich Brahmin children were clearly superior to all other children.⁴³ On the other hand Sinha's studies on the interpretation of certain pictorial cues and sequential perception revealed that quality of schooling and caste status were significant factors in performance on these tasks. Performance of those from ordinary schools where children from economically inferior homes went were significantly inferior to those from superior schools where mostly children from well-to-do middle class and upper middle class families were admitted. Furthermore, with the same type of schooling scheduled caste children tended to perform poorly in comparison to their non-scheduled caste counterparts on both the types of tasks requiring simple and complex perceptual skills. Sinha concludes that there is an accumulating evidence that deficiencies caused by poverty and other factors of deprivation start early and go on cumulating so that performance differentials between the high and the low groups increase with increasing years in school.⁴⁴

In this connection, Rath's studies⁴⁵ are particularly interesting. He observed no differences among children of Brahmins, scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in basic intelligence, but lower performance of the latter two on concept formation, comprehension of meaning, vocabulary and association of ideas. He concluded that factors that cause depression in cognitive growth as well as the motivation for education are present in children from poor homes. Similarly Tripathi and Misra found that on six tests of cognitive functions and mental ability, the low deprived group did significantly better than the high deprived, but their castewise analysis did not reveal any difference.⁴⁶ Rath also discussed the problem of linguistic skill developed of the poor. He observed that the language used by lower caste and tribal children at home is quite different from that used and required in schools and therefore they come inadequately equipped to meet the linguistic demands of the school situation.

Class Consciousness and Protest Behaviour:

As a group, the poor in India are atomised. It would be impossible to overlook the fact there are poor or materially deprived people both in urban and rural areas, belonging to different castes and occupations, with varying levels of social relations with mode of productions or livelihood. The truth therefore is the fact that the poor in India has been scattered and that it cannot claim unity in the sense of group solidarity. Since the poor are

not concentrated spatially and socially, its members from individualistic isolated existence rather than a socially cohesive unit without a sense of common purpose and destiny. In the circumstances, in spite of the common denominator of social and economic exploitation and conditions of material deprivations, ties with the pre-capitalist past traditions remain strong among the poor in which notions such as caste and social stratifications still exercise an influence and impede the attainment of class consciousness. By class-consciousness we mean here the Marxian concept of attainment of revolutionary consciousness rather than merely a psychological awareness of common misery and a fellow feeling which at best may attain a consciousness appropriate to trade union activity.⁴⁷

Being devoid of class-consciousness and scattered, the low-caste poor in India are socially and politically less organised as a group. Among the three caste groups in Delhi villages, for example, Moulik observed that the poor chamar group was structurally least coherent and cohesive than the landowning high-caste, Brahmins and Jats.⁴⁸ Faced with the given social reality of material deprivations, the poor therefore tend to respond more in an individualistic and often selfish approach towards survival - behaviour rather than as group or class. Consequently, the poor particularly in rural areas remain unorganised (or unorganisable) for any political or social actions. Hence commenting on Raj Krishna's suggestion for unionisation of the rural poor,⁴⁹ Tendulkar commented:

"Successful unionisation requires two prerequisites: first, holding capacity of the members and second the homogeneity of interests. On both the counts Raj Krishna's suggestion appears to meet with many difficulties, though we agree with its desirability."⁵⁰

As a result, the poor by far and large, do not belong to unions to clubs, cooperatives to fraternal organizations or to political parties. The picture is however little different for the urban poor, especially the slum dwellers and squatter settlers. It is relatively easy to be organised this group and make them participate in institutions, community organisation and political parties; There are several contributory factors for this such as, length of time the community existed, the stability of the population, physically boundedness, existence of some symbolic representation of the collective identity (such as a name of the community, patron saint or a separate ritual cycle) etc. This Siddiqui indicate that the highly organised inner-city slum which he has described in India is over a century old.⁵¹ Lack of participation of the poor in the formal or informal organizations or their incapacity to organise themselves do not necessarily stem from their inherent apathy or withdrawal, but from realistic recognition of the structural limitations such as the divisive factor of the heterogeneity of the poor, lack of financial resources, unrelated goals of the organisations towards their immediate needs, dominance by the non-poor and so on. However, the poor are often found to organise themselves into groups around economic activities, festivals, rituals, - which

are preferred and sometimes function more efficiently than those organised from outside. The poor are less reliant on formal association initiated from outside, be it government or a benevolent social worker, arising mainly out of their distrust about the unknown hostile world. History and traditions have made them photogenic in the sense that they are almost neurotic characterised by the anxious fear of an object (anything outside the individual and intimate environment) or by extension of a situation external to their immediate environment.

In spite of the fact that the poor in India lack class-consciousness and group solidarity, that there is greater fatalism and acceptance of inequality following the theory of caste-stratification and Karma, it would be grossly wrong to conclude that there is not hostility or aggression. As Mencher indicates that the theory of Karma has probably been at all times less acceptable to Harijans than to Brahmins and there has always been a large amount of hostility and resentment among the Harijans toward those higher in the social hierarchy.^{51a}

Psychologically there could be two levels of protest behaviour resulting from frustrations. A poor may direct his aggression inwardly toward himself or join a group with similar professed goals against another group. Both are behavioural manifestations of desparation syndroms. In the first case, that is inward directed aggression to onself, the protest behaviour may be

manifested in extreme desperation to a deathwish or a self-annihilation. In an extremely materially deprived condition the life to the poor is often deprived of its sense meaning, and as Durkheim suggests⁵² in that situation the poor is drawn towards the feeling of committing suicide as a protest directed against himself. Two random selection from recent Press reports will exemplify tragic behaviour under poverty conditions:

"Six members of a family in the village of Majhna under Kadwa police station Purnea district, Bihar, recently committed suicide by hanging themselves, because they were unable to get foodgrains."⁵³

"A carpenter of village Katnikol in Shekhpura Thana of Moughyr district allegedly administered poison to his three children and wife on Monday last to end their misery caused by prolonged starvation. All the family died"⁵⁴

But the poor do not always resort to individual or collective suicides as a defeated silent protest against the existing order. Often they resort to organised group protests in a larger scale. The recent phenomenon of landgrab movement, the initial Naxalbari movement and many other agrarian tensions and movements by scheduled castes and tribes as being witnessed in various parts of India are the examples of such group protest behaviour.⁵⁵ In these group-protests, however shortlived it might be, one finds the rudiments of the revolutionary class-consciousness among the depressed poor. This is not to suggest that this kind of group protest behaviour is a recent development in India, it has been there historically since long past - may be at a different level and scale.

What is now interesting is the fact that this kind of protest behaviour in India are increasingly taking the character of class-conflict and political mobilisation and also are happening more frequently. It is almost pathetic that we find no serious psychological analysis of this crucial and nationally important behavioural dimension of the poor in India.

Anti-Social Behaviour and Mental Health:

To a common non-poor Indian, the poor is a "chhotalok" (not 'bhadralok') - a negative social evaluation characterised poor as a source of anti-social behaviour, that is, crime (stealing, robbery, killing etc.), juvenile delinquency, sexual immorality, excessive procreation, drunkenness, gambling, laziness, broken home, physical contests, illicit activities and aggressive challenge to authority. Many of these anti-social behaviour seem to be perfectly normal and rational from the point of view of those under materially deprived conditions. For example, drunkenness and gambling could be viewed as a form escapism and temporary relief from anxiety or social reality; stealing, robbery, 'tough' behaviour of juvenile delinquents, gambling, illicit activities etc. could be viewed as the maximising behaviour for survival; laziness may actually be in response to lack of opportunities and so on, and a sum total of all these anti-social behavioural manifestations could be viewed as a protest against the existing social order and norms. In other words, it is a collective catharsis in the sense that in every

society, in every collectivity, exists - must exist - a channel an outlet through which the forces of accumulated in the form of frustration-aggression can be released. For a psychologist, it is not enough to discover that such anti-social behaviour exists among the poor; to him, what makes a discontented materially deprived poor man more likely to choose these responses is a more important issue to study. The two most important factors in such an analysis are opportunity and cost. A poor low-caste man who perceives no possibility of satisfying his needs in productive ways and one who experiences blocked mobility-opportunities in socially acceptable ways to achieve his level of aspirations. Secondly, in choosing an 'anti-social' activity in response to tension a person has to consider, at least in the long run, the social cost involved in it. Analysis of 'anti-social' behaviour in this psychoanalytical model will be more useful. For example, to a poor, being arrested for stealing or robbery may not involve a social or economic cost, rather it may be perceived by him as an opportunity to get food regularly and less maintenance cost for his household. Unfortunately, there have been no such psychological studies in India.

However, there are a few studies on the impact of poverty on mental health. For example, the information available on crime in India showed a direct correlation between the low-income status and incidences of crimes. It is also evident that in areas of prosperity or in the hilly or tribal areas there is less

cognizable offences than in areas which are industrializing fast with disparities growing between the rich and the poor.^{55a}

Shanmugan's studies revealed that psychotics, emotional instability, anxiety, aggression, punishment and depression seemed to be related with low socio-economic status.⁵⁶ Shrimathy and Mani independently observed in their separate studies that the murderers were more likely to come from low socio-economic families.⁵⁷

Future Direction:

It is clear from the foregoing review of psychological studies of poverty in India, that in terms of number of studies it is abysmally small according to the magnitude of the problem, methodologically many of these studies are questionable and contentwise irrelevant. As mentioned earlier, it shows the 'poverty of psychology' in addressing itself as a social science to one of the crucial national problems of poverty. It is therefore at this stage, although inordinately late, one must be careful in choosing the direction and proper relevant methodologies for studying the crucial psychological problems of poverty.

Broadly, the psychological studies of poverty in India should be divided into two parts:

- (1) a psychoanalytic interpretation of the life experiences of the people living in materially deprived conditions; and
- (2) a psychoanalytic interpretation of the myth of culture of poverty.

Within these two broad categories, the crucial behavioural issues needed indepth studies in future are: (a) the process of socialization and internalization of values under poverty conditions; (b) the distortion of motivations and aspirations under material deprivations; (c) the protest behaviour (both at individual and group level) and organizability of the poor under deprived conditions; (d) the extent of class-consciousness among the poor and relevant factors contributing to it and its behavioural manifestations; and (e) the behavioural response to government programmes, legislations and other ameliorative and corrective measures.

To make a dent on the so far neglected area of study, the psychologists have to address themselves to the active issues as mentioned above. To do that one needs to be imaginative and creative in formulating a proper methodology, rather than simply borrowing 'phoren' techniques.

There is, however, no substitute for social-anthropologists method of direct participant observation in studying the problem like poverty in India. However skillful a psychologist might be, administering a few tests, scales, questionnaires in a short encounter with a poor respondent would not reveal the inner dimension of poverty behaviour. There is the long history of distrust, lack of empathy and paternalism. Indian psychologists seem to be busy in developing scales, tests, sensitivity, training - all those less relevant, ethnocentric tools borrowed

from 'phoren' countries, which both methodologically as well as contentwise are redundant and meaningless.

Shy of anthropologists' direct observation, the psychologists could at least attempt to analyse and interpret a huge body of literary material, anthropological studies and journalists' reports. Shyam Benegal, a noted film director seem to be more sensitive and accurate in depicting the problems of poverty psychology in the films, 'Ankur' and 'Nishant' than the scores of psychological studies quoted in this review article.. The use of psychological interpretation of literary materials related to the deprived conditions of scheduled castes are creatively demonstrated by Miller and Kale and by Beatrice Miller⁵⁸ Instead of loosing time uselessly in borrowing or developing, administering tests and scales, it is hoped that the psychologists now pursue this interesting and useful methodology. It will at least save the psychologists' botheration to experience the living in poverty - as the anthropologists would do.

All these do not mean that if the psychologists, like the economists, start analysing the problems of poverty in proper fashion, the poverty problem will be solved. It will never, What will happen, however is that as the social scientists, the psychologists in India will be free of their conscience of guilt accumulated through neglect of the crucial problems. Whether or not psychological studies of the poor are done or not or whatever way it might be done in future the poor's psychology of the world would go on caricaturing the

larger society in the following words:

I have wound on my body
Which no one will heal
But I have staffed the world with doctors.

I rejoice to hear the cry of a baby born
But I have heard it become whimper of hunger.

I walk in slush and mud where no roads go
But I have bound together a nation with highways
I flee my mud but that floodwater crumble
But I have taught man to build with prestressed concrete

I am surrounded by children
With malnourished minds
But I have given man his first philosophy.

I was beaten down by the invader
But I have risen up and embraced him.
I live in fear and crime of my slums
But I have policed peace in the Congo.

I speak in tongues that number in their hundred
But the world has called me a name: India.

I am-said
But I am glad
I am.

This is not a poetry by any renowned poet. It is simply an advertisement of a foreign pharmaceutical company, Hoechst, appeared in one of the popular scholarly Indian journals, Economic and Political Weekly. The Indian psychologists are yet to give a better interpretation of poor man in India than this piece of creative advertisement.

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