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Embracing the Other in Margin: Gandhian Understating of Poverty, Marginalisation and Development

Poverty is an extremely complex phenomenon, which manifests itself in a dense range of overlapping and interweaving economic, political and social elements. These include economic deprivation, assetlessness, low income levels, hunger, poor health, insecurity, physical and psychological hardship, social exclusion, degradation and discrimination, and political powerlessness and disarticulation. It may be transient, as during sudden natural disasters, or chronic and persistent over time. In mainstream Marxist literature, poverty is conventionally defined predominantly in terms of expropriation of the legitimate control over the mode of production of the working classes by the exploiting classes. It is seen to be the result of the fact that the producing classes do not own the assets of production, such as land and capital. In contemporary literature, poverty is frequently understood in terms of the lack of control not only over land, but also forests, water and mineral resources.

There are other approaches as well, such as those that view poverty and marginalisation in terms of social exclusion and discrimination. However, none of these definitions adequately address questions such as say why those excluded in particular ways may or may not be as badly off economically as some but there is something specific to that marginalisation that results in a structured and continuous denial of rights.

It was in Gandhi's ideas and action one finds scope for recognizing people for what they are and celebration of the very principles that are anti-thesis to modern society – values such as femininity, non-productivity, etc. it was with the strength of such perspectives that one can hope to visibilize the people condemned into the dark tunnels of society. This research is an effort in that direction.

One glaring aspect of the marginalized groups' life strategies that has been unconscionably invisibilised is their sense of agency expressed through their collective and individual actions. While this paper would pay due attention to the individual, micro life strategies of the poorest, its primary focus would be privileging their collective expression of agency, and will argue that the notion of joint humanity is very important.

Key Words: Poverty, Development, Sociology, Marginalisation, Human agency, Coping, Collectivisation.

Introduction

Almost all poverty-specific research is principally conducted under the banner of different Social Sciences in general and Development Studies in particular. Although Development Studies (it also includes policy studies) aspires to claim a place in the fold of social sciences, there is a crucial difference in their treatment of their respective objects of study, both in approach and in emphasis. For the former poverty is a primary and avowed concern, whereas for the latter it is incidental that knowledge about poverty is added. Thus the present research undertaken here has to clarify whether it brackets itself in the category of Development Research conducted in the fashion normalized by Development Studies discipline or in the category of a social science research. The difference between them is decisive as some mutually challenging and reciprocally critical foundational notions guide them. Choosing one over the other is not just a matter of research focus but also expressive of the values and worldview we stand by. Much of the research conducted under the umbrella of Development Studies in the form of poverty research tends to proceed by taking some crucial notions as given while Social science research would treat them as contestable and problematic. One can think of even “poverty” here. In the same way, the foundational conceptions of “society” and “human person” that underlay these two disciplines are different in a significant way. In a manner of saying, one might argue that social sciences have not dealt with poverty as exclusively as perhaps the Development Studies. The causes are political in both camps, albeit the good that has happened in either of the camps. However in the final analysis, poverty research not tempered by the debates and insights of the social sciences tends to produce conclusions and results that are incomplete and superficial, when not self-serving.

Poverty Studies and Social sciences

Our understanding of poverty and marginalisation is heavily structured by a divisive logic of modernity. Seldom does such understanding engage in a self-reflexive inquiry into its own ways of constructing the categories that are now taken as ‘given’, for example ‘poverty’ as a construct. Since their very existence and relevance rest on postulating a foundational reality called ‘poverty’, they present it as a well-rounded singular object and as an ever-persisting reality. But since this has a strong bearing on policies and practices of governmental and non-governmental organisations, we need to dissect this notion and explore an alternative perspective. Talking about alternative, one can hope to learn a lot from Gandhian understanding of poverty and marginalisation.

Before going into that, let us discuss the problems besetting the prevailing understandings of poverty.

The first such problem flows from the social sciences’ historical and intellectual legacies, that are decisively modern. Historically social sciences were born in times when the western hegemony was establishing itself through colonialism

very stridently. As the products of modernity these disciplines mostly sided with the colonial empires and furthered their agendas. Though there were dissenting voices within social science fold, the dominant voices were supportive of the colonizing forces as they saw the latter as the harbingers of modernity. Though the criminal intentions of the colonizing forces were taken note of by the most conscientious among the social scientists, they were pardoned for they were treated as necessary costs to be paid for promoting and disseminating modernity. In this sense the social scientists were willingly missing the trees of criminal acts of colonialism for the wood of modernizing intentions of the imperial forces.

Thus the social sciences were more focused at the processes that contributed to the dissemination and effects of modernity. As a result poverty was treated as the reality specific only to the non-modern societies, and poverty was regarded as the manifestation of the deadweight of the traditions. Hence social science research was obsessively fixated with modernity and the factors that promote it. If caste, race, agrarian economy, village power relations etc were studied by Social sciences it was not so much for the impoverishment they caused but for the challenges they posed for the spread of modernity. Poverty and other social ills were thought to melt into air with the arrival of modernity. The untrammled optimism for modernity and the redemptions it will bring upon the societies mired in traditions had persuaded the social scientists to give scant attention to poverty. If any thing, poverty was regarded as a problem coming in the way of modernity marching successfully. By strengthening modernity, poverty was thought to disappear.

Methodological Rigidities

Secondly, on the methodological front too there was least encouragement for grappling with poverty, let alone conceptualizing it. Much of social science disciplines particularly sociology, political sciences, and anthropology, were steeped in functionalist and systemic paradigm due to which they were intensely concerned about normal state of affairs in the society and about the processes and means for maintaining it. Poverty and all its manifestations were regarded as abnormal and therefore dysfunctional to the society. While the social scientist were alarmed at the higher incidences of abnormality in society they still treated them as the excreta that would be washed away by the oncoming waves of normalcy achieved by the engulfment of the entire society by modernity. The social scientists' persuasive recommendations for social engineering were aimed at working on the reinstatement of normalcy. It was believed that normalcy defined in modernist spirit will establish the equilibrium and will banish abnormality in their wake. This resulted in the whole focus centering on social engineering and the effects of it on the wider society.

Poverty thus was consigned to the status of the crust on the surface of the society that will have to be eliminated forthwith through social engineering efforts.

Social sciences, as they were growing in the shadow of the supremacy of scientific rigour in natural sciences, had assigned the task of studying poverty to less theoretical disciplines like social work and development studies. However the latter were 20th century phenomena and very much the product of the social engineering orientation of the social sciences. Development Studies, on the other hand, aspired to objectify poverty so that doing so would help development professionals and the agencies they belong to have a “problem” that can be “managed”. The result: Development studies, solidified the multifaceted experience of impoverishment into a managerial issue for the development sector. Marginalised persons too were understood in the same sense. They are those who failed to integrate themselves into the redeeming processes of modernity, for reasons mostly personal – personal incapacity, inability and inadequacy. Many of the development studies disciplines in various incarnations too took this up uncritically and went about understanding, assessing and measuring poverty without ever problematising it as a relational product. Poverty was understood by the Development studies only with a biomedical perspective, which treated poverty as a disease that has crept into society like a germ into the human body. It was in the manner of going to war that poverty was approached.

Development as Elimination of Poverty

The absence of discourses on poverty and marginalisation in social sciences can also be explained in terms of how they conceptualize development. Development in social sciences is understood in mostly positive terms in that it was treated in terms of several presences that affirmed development. For example development was measured in terms of what have to be established rather than in terms of what have to be eliminated. A society was regarded as developed if it has acquired scientific spirit, rational attitude and economic prosperity. It was believed that the establishment of these traits would drive away all other problems and social ills. With this understanding, social sciences had taken upon themselves the task of informing various social forces as to how these presences can be brought in. Such conception of development compelled them to study those processes that maintain or facilitate or act as impediments to these traits.

Simultaneously development studies offered a contrastive view on development. In their conception, development was understood in terms of the elimination of negative presences. Development is such a state in society when poverty and other such ‘social ills’ are eliminated. In the development studies’ perspective poverty and other such phenomenon were given the kind of place that disease occupied in biomedical disciplines. Therefore maintenance of normalcy calls for singling out the disease and bringing it under the microscope for analysis, measurement and management. Poverty was a disease and it was studied in the same spirit in which diseases were studied in medical sciences. For these disciplines development is the ‘normal’ state that every society has to strive for. However, now there is an easy way out to achieve development (easy way out only conceptually but

not in reality where poverty elimination proves to be an elusive task) – eliminate poverty and there comes development! The easy equivalence of development with the absence of poverty triggered off unfettered interest in poverty, its kinds and types.

Poverty became an issue of grave importance only in the last three decades. Ever since human and social development was no longer assumed to be an automatic concomitant of economic development and as something that had to be actively pursued and established, social development has become a big techno-managerial concern of the development agencies, both that of the state and non-state. This shift has bred a different understanding of poverty and who the poor are. This shift has also legitimized the arrival and continued presence of an army of development institutions, organisations and professionals that have assumed the mandate of facilitating, achieving and consolidating development in the societies and groups deemed underdeveloped by them. They have all come together to create a particular reality called poverty in a fashion that validates their interventions in the society and the lives of the impoverished members in it. The way, in which international development organisations, particularly World Bank, have suddenly brought poverty at centre of the development discourse, hides certain self-serving intentions of these institutions, rather than just the noble concerns for the poor. At once, poverty was very extensively and vigorously studied by Development Studies. Many poverty studies soon ensued. In the long run, both the noble and not-so-noble intentions of poverty studies have conspired and worked overtime to establish a distinct ontological reality of being poor and poverty. It is as if they have carved out a new species of human – the one who is in poverty.

Gandhian Perspective

Studies on poverty and marginalisation in all their manifestations (development studies etc.) are seemingly immune to the critical inputs from eastern visions, particularly Gandhian vision. Pitching their significance only in relation to policy influencing and policy making, they sacrifice research rigour and critical inquiry for the sake of arriving at spectacularly grand generalizations that are amenable to policy formulations. In the same spirit, they seldom engage in a self-reflexive inquiry into their own ways of constructing the categories that are now taken as 'given', for example 'poverty' as a construct. Since their very existence and relevance rest on postulating a foundational reality called 'poverty', they present it as a well-rounded singular object and as an ever-persisting reality.

Once poverty is understood as a 'construct', the deconstruction of it leads to the reinvention of human as free individuals, who do not define themselves in terms of lack and deficiency. Such is the power of this construct that by successfully amalgamating local conditions of absence of material wealth with the global conception of material wealth as the necessary and sufficient condition of good life, the social majority of humanity has been reduced to non-humans in need of assistance. What is worse, instilling that sense of such social majority, it has made "seeking assistance" as part of their self-definition. When

the non-rich (materially) believes that they are 'poor' and only through external assistance they can overcome their being poor, what gets valorized is the whole army of development experts and their institutional apparatuses-they alone can eradicate poverty.

What the development studies has done, or what the mainstream social sciences has failed to question, is absolutisation of 'poverty' as material deficiency. While material deficiency was definitely part of people's expectation of distress and destitution in the pre-modern societies they were deeply embedded in their culture and linked to spatial-temporal specialties.

How each culture or even each category of people went about constituting non-materiality, differed from one society to another or even within a society? In a similar manner, a whole host of non-material aspects too were considered as constituting destitution. This non-materiality too was culturally embedded. In some cultures, not having neighbours to live close-by gave them a sense of deficiency, whereas in certain other societies and groups having too many neighbours living in close proximity was distressing. Besides these, other culturally deemed notion too come to define inability, such as abandonment, not having people to love and be loved, neglect, not having respect, domination by others, discrimination, oppression, deprivation, hunger, malnutrition, homelessness ill-health and exclusion from educational possibilities etc. had been considered as constituting their experience of "meaningless-ness".

The deconstruction of poverty will also lead to rescue of human from a whole gamut of reductionism to which he/she has been subjected to. It may also result in the triumph of local versus the global, because, at present, the latter seems to have imposed its abstraction on the lived experience of the vernacular societies.

We argue that it can rescue human, because, the existing discourse on poverty has devalued human beings as meaning-seeking individuals and indeed reduced them as saleable commodities through the notion of labour-as-essence, as in the same way as the earth has become a saleable product through the notion of land. What it has entailed is that the poor is one who is unable to sell himself/herself to meet his/her requirements.

The equation of man with labour and nature with land has its origin in the economization of society, whereby resourcelessness came to be defined as a problem. And resourcefulness acquired extraordinary significance. Therefore economic resourcefulness largely in the form of material resources became identified with being 'developed' and the lack or absence of which is being 'underdeveloped'. It gets further individualized when such resourcefulness is equated with personal possessions. Those without individual possessions in abundance need to emulate the ones with lots of such individual possessions.

In this scheme of things what is available to the community or group as a whole does not qualify the members of such group or community as 'resourceful' people. For instance as individual with unusual quantity of wealth even in the midst of the community of people suffering from hunger or malnutrition or oppressions and dominations is still wealthy, whereas the eastern worldview before being influenced by modernity saw meaninglessness not at the individual level but at the collective community level. The suffering of one's community or another member thereof is also the suffering of the evaluating individual. The state of existence of any of his/her

caste member is also extended upon the evaluating individual of the same caste. Echoing his Gandhi locates the poverty of the community or society not the poor but in the greedy rich and their thieving nature, Gandhi said, "I suggest that we [the resourceful people] are thieves in a way. If I take anything that I do not need for my own immediate use, and keep it, I steal it from somebody else. I venture to suggest that it is the fundamental law of Nature, without exception, that Nature produces enough for our wants from day to day, and if only everybody took enough for himself and nothing more, there would be no pauperism in this world, there would be no man dying of starvation in this world." In another place Gandhi again emphasizes the collectivist vision thus, "Welfare of the country is certainly included in the welfare of the world, and individual welfare is included in the welfare of the country. On the other hand, individual welfare should include the welfare of the world" (Gandhi, 1934, 22 March).

But what modern/capitalistic logic has done is to subjugate the collective consciousness to quantified individualized global abstractions. In the same way, the cultural understanding of self gets subordinated to the economic understanding of self. This consequently has led to subjugation of local by national and even more dangerously of national by global. What emerged from such series of subjugations is that materiality has got triumphed over non-materiality.

The death of diversity in understanding one's existence occurs exactly at the point when singular global-level abstract definition of poverty is imposed on the psyche of everyone. Thus in contrast to societies that valued detachment over attachment to material possessions, "having more" material wealth come to be privileged. In place of societies that united individual with communities when defining their selves, releasing of the individuals from the holds of the communities got prioritized. The reversal of hierarchies ended up privileging a whole host of development experts who can be trained only in western/modern knowledge system. Similarly the right to judge whether someone is poor has been divested of concerned individuals or their communities and has got vested in global institutional apparatuses located in western world. Curiously these institutions are the creations of the western nations that privilege themselves only on account of possessing more material wealth, though concentrated in the individual hands.

Here once sees a curious paradox: While the western world treats the unusual wealth of one individual/individuals as generalizable to the healthiness of their societies, they refuse to generalize the wealth/ resourcefulness of the society or communities to the individuals in the eastern societies or the impoverished in their own societies. This paradox is sustained only because wealth is quantified in the form of GDPs and per-capita incomes, rather than seen as an experience whose quality and necessity is left to the assessment and judgment of individuals/communities. It is true that the so-called rich nations like USA has vast oceans of improvised people, yet the country remains a rich nation. If one goes by Mandela's understanding of freedom or Gandhian understanding of liberation, then the so called rich nations will have to lose all their moral authorities to judge other humanities as 'poor'. Mandela in one of the profound statements he has made says "Freedom is indivisible; the chains on any one of my people were the chains on all of them, the chains on all of my people were the chains on me". Gandhi in his own refreshing way says that

the dawn of freedom will not occur if the last man in India is not liberated. And it is a public knowledge that Gandhi refused to enjoy any luxuries of the world, until such luxuries reached the last man on the earth. He has advocated the same for all the resourceful people in the world. He said “all people having money or property should hold it in trust for the society” (Gandhi, 1939).”

But such sense of shame and guilt has been made to vapourize with the arrival of experts and expert institutions on the one hand and compartmentalization of individual psyche as conterminous to individual body and experience on the other. The very moment of acceptance of oneself as resourceful is also the very moment at which the moral responsibility and joint humanity with the existence of the other get dispelled from the vision.

In this effort the role of social sciences is decisive. Particularly the science of psychology has contributed immensely to the atomization of individual mind, by inventing such compartmentalized psyche as emerging and dying with the birth and death of such individual.

In Gandhian and Buddhist view of poverty one can see the tendency to culturalise and moralise poverty in contrast to the overly secularized and abstracted conception of poverty enunciated by western paradigms. In social science framework too such culturalised understanding of poverty was absent until the arrival of Amartya Sen—whose eastern sensibilities aiding that cannot be exaggerated.

The strength of Gandhian vision is that the cultural context of poverty is called into question rather than mere condition of poverty. In such a vision one avoids the tragic tendency of locating poverty in the poor -- his/her lack of initiative and effort (Rosen, George. 1982: p.437). In the secularized understanding of poverty, not only the poverty of the individual is traced to the individual psyche, but even the poverty of the entire society gets traced to the individual poor. It is through this unfair tracing the poor gets solidified into a group, though they themselves are a highly variegated people in their own right. But this location of poverty in poor becomes necessary for the experts to rescue themselves as the cause of poverty.

But, by locating poverty in the cultural context and seeing it as the product of the prevailing structure of unequal relationship, Gandhian vision calls into question the issue of dominance, oppression and inequality in power and conceptual categories organized in favour of the most powerful. Thus, poverty is seen as the outcome of conceptual shifts as well as the result of relationship patterns. Here the blame is laid at the doorsteps of knowledge producers and dominant groups.

But this uncomfortable vision must be laid to rest and put to relegation. As new scapegoat has to be found so that the ‘resourceful’ group can exonerate itself, it becomes all the more necessary to locate the scapegoat that has ‘frustrated’ every well-meaning attempt at development. Excluded a priori were those experts that had prepared or advised the general strategies for the eradication of poverty. On the other hand it was equally embarrassing to accuse the intellectually bankrupt governments of most of the southern nations for the continued troubled state of affairs.

Those left open that final, easily available common target for the abuses of despair - the low-income groups, including the landless labourer the small farmer, the unemployed craftsman. And since they could be calculated upon not to react or return the attack, experts and government set about the task at will.

But what is forgotten and swept under the carpet is the truth that “the principal obstacles set in the path of the emancipation of the poor came not from below but from above -- from the ruling groups at the village, regional, national and international levels, who only allowed change on their own terms”.

In the Gandhian vision we can note the problematisation of, both material and culture of wealth-making as the cause of poverty, rather than poor. It is immensely significant to remember that when Gandhi talks of trusteeship, he lists out prescription for the so called ‘resourceful’ to re-vision their wealth-making and their relationship with wealth (Appadorai, 1969, p.326). Throughout his writing/thinking he formulated lessons for the rich and other resourceful groups change their ways of being. This is a highly ethicised version of poverty. Elaborating further, Jeevan Kumar writes, “Basically, Gandhi suggested this concept as an answer to the economic inequalities of ownership and income, a kind of non-violent way of resolving all social and economic conflicts prevalent in the world. Therefore, man’s dignity, and not his material prosperity, is the centre of Gandhian economics. Gandhian economics aims at a distribution of material prosperity, keeping only human dignity in view. Thus it is dominated more by moral values than by economic ideas. According to Gandhi, Trusteeship is the only ground on which one can work out an ideal combination of economics and morality (Jeevan Kumar 2007, pp 1-3).

In sum Gandhi provides enough scope for the social origins of poverty and clearly argues that poverty as scarcity as socially-produced rather than as objectively existing. This vision has immense potential to radically restructure our thought processes and practices concerning poverty elimination and development.

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