

A RIGHTS-BASED FRAMEWORK TO THEORISE POVERTY

Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Issues Related to Poverty, Inclusion, Employment & Sustainable Development

Illustration and Painting

A rather interesting debate has followed the awarding of the Nobel Prize in Economics to Esther Duflo, Abhijit Banerjee and Michael Kerner. Critics have argued that the method followed by the three avoids big questions about income inequality and redistribution. The question from the perspective of political theory is, perhaps, bigger — what is the moral status of the global poor in poverty reduction schemes? Do the poor have names, faces, aspirations, dreams, projects and sensibilities? Or are they destined to be anonymous and faceless?

About thirty years ago, prominent philosophers based in Western universities sparked off what came to be known as the 'global justice debate'. The argument caught imaginations across the world. Seldom had people seen such missionary zeal ignited in young minds studying in philosophy departments. Everyone wanted to do something about global poverty and the global poor.

Ironically, the global justice debate was extremely exclusionary — it divided the world into the 'distant needy' in the global south; and the affluent people living in the West who owed the global poor for various reasons, ranging from compassion, guilt, charity and philanthropy to injustice wreaked by global institutions, like the World Trade Organization, dominated by Western powers.

Nowhere did we find a mention of colonialism as a factor that was responsible for poverty. Unlike the 1970s dependency debate, scholars of the 'third world' were excluded by definitional fiat from a debate pitched as 'universal' and 'global'. The West owed 'our poor', but we had no obligation to the poor of the first world. In these philosophically complex theories, the global poor continued to be 'anonymous'; they were inert, mere recipients of concern and, sometimes, charity doled out by the West. Poverty was cause for some anxiety, the moral status of the global poor was not of interest.

Recollect the 2005 campaign organised by global civil society: 'Make Poverty History'. The campaign harnessed celebrities like Bob Geldof, Bono, and Brad Pitt to add glamour to the agenda. The media was deployed to tell a tale of how 'we' could change 'their' lives through symbolic gestures, such as wearing white bands, signifying solidarity. Sceptics remarked that the campaign showcased less of poverty and more of those who wanted to make a difference. The poor remained on the margins. 'Third world' activists were outraged; the campaign had staged the pornography of poverty.

In other circles, these campaigns caught on because they did not offend anyone. There was no demand for economic redistribution, creative use of political power or progressive taxation. They conformed to 'sufficientarian' philosophy: give the poor enough to eat. How does it matter whether they are given an opportunity to be equal to the rest or not?

But poverty cannot be abstracted from society; it is a product of and a signifier of a deeply unjust and unequal society. P is poor because she does not have the resources to go to school, read, indulge in hobbies, watch a movie, go out with her friends and plan a career like other girls. P,

note, is not only *poor*, she is *unequal* to others because she is unable to do the things they do.

The poor are not only deprived of access to material benefits, they are socially marginalised, reduced to vote banks by political parties, humiliated and subjected to intense disrespect. To be poor is to be robbed of the opportunity to participate in social, economic and cultural transactions from a plane of equality. Poverty is not only about *poverty*, it is also about *inequality*. Researchers and policymakers have to take this aspect of poverty head on. Can we do something about poverty without taking on an oppressive society? If we cannot do so, poverty will continue to be produced and reproduced by an exploitative society, as an integral part of this society.

More significantly, how can we ignore that on momentous occasions, the poor have acted not as passive, inert subjects but as agents? We would do well to remember that the debate on global poverty accelerated in the 1990s. By then, the first phase of the globalisation project propelled by doctrines of free trade and unregulated markets had run into trouble in countries like Mexico, Thailand, Japan, Russia and Brazil; impoverished thousands; and generated rage and discontent. Since the 1980s, countries in South America and in Sub-Saharan Africa had been rocked by what came to be known as 'anti-IMF riots'. Now, activists proceeded to target multilateral institutions identified as responsible for the generalised misery of the global south.

A major shift in the rhetoric and strategy of global institutions was in response to aggressive and sustained campaigns like the '50 years [of the World Bank] is enough' in the concrete and virtual spaces of global civil society. In many cases, the global poor fought alongside activists against terrible outcomes of globalisation.

Across the global south, grass-roots organisations have struggled to implement 'social protection' schemes, and give the poor rights to the land upon which they have constructed rude shanty towns. The poor have standing as political agents because they have struggled for some social provisioning, bargained with political parties, and shown solidarity with other groups.

"The heart of the capital", wrote Graham Greene in *The Comedians*, "is a shanty town". Note how the shanty town defines the modern city; how, for instance, in Mumbai, multi-storied shacks interrogate planning and architecture, how they subvert the notion of the planned city, and how they transform urban landscapes. We do not have to romanticise the shanty town like Raj Kapoor did in *Shree 420*. The shanty town has a dark culture best exemplified by Amitabh Bachchan's character in *Deewaar*. But we should be able to appreciate the grit of the inhabitants. They construct the city but the heartless city has no place for them. They make their own place through struggle. They know that justice has to be wrested from imperfectly just states.

How can we, then, theorise the moral status of the poor? One way this can be done is by imagining human beings as bearers of the right to a fair share in the collective resources of society. If these resources have been disproportionately monopolised by upper-class groups, and if others have been historically subjected to injustice, disadvantaged persons have the right to demand that they be granted their rightful share. There is a difference between people approaching the system as victims and people fighting for their rights. A fair share in the resources of the society can be conceptualised as ownership of enough resources to allow human beings a reasonable chance of living decent lives. The wider objective of redistributive justice is that persons should participate in society, politics, and the market as equals.

Finally, at some point, we have to ask whether our task as democrats ends with the proposition that people should not be poor. Should we disclaim any further responsibility for the historically disadvantaged after providing them with minimum material needs? Should we not move

constantly towards a shared vision of an egalitarian democracy where people can live fulfilling lives, instead of remaining mired in notions of minimal reparation or remedies?

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