

IISS INTERNATIONAL ILEM SUMMER SCHOOL 3



SOCIAL JUSTICE AND POVERTY IN MUSLIM WORLD PROCEEDINGS

ORGANIZERS



SUPPORTERS



Global Poverty Discourse and its Implications on Muslim World

Fasseh Ahmed*

Abstract: The main objective of this paper to apply an archeological approach to the theoretical approach of the social contract called poverty. The paper argues on the discursive construction of poverty that for centuries poor was only used as an adjective. People had few things but they never thought of themselves as poor. Richness constituted the richness of relations tying together the members of a community. On the other hand poverty as such did not exist (or had a totally different meaning that it has now), because whoever was lacking something important could rely on those who could help him satisfy his lacks. The poor quality of a given thing still expressed the existence within that thing of certain deficiencies and lacks that only prevent its reach on its own levels of perfection (example: a poor health, a poor soil, a poor mind) with the advent of industrial revolution, urbanization and monetization of economy has totally changed this traditional concepts of rich and poor, because monetization of economy imposed itself as a major and socially accepted standard for measure all things, the lacks defining poverty were also identified with the lack of money and of what money could buy. The paper divided into two sections first sections explains the historical and theoretical foundations of global poverty discourse. In the second section I will discuss the case study of tharparkar Pakistan in which I explained how transformation of poverty discourse impacted indigenous economies of the Muslim world. The main theme of the paper is to argue what is called today poverty is a socially fabricated concept that tends to dispossess the people, under an arbitrarily defined poverty line.

Keywords: Poverty, Poverty Discourse, Tharparker, Muslim World, Pakistan.

Introduction

The poverty as a word is the key word of our times usually used by experts. A huge amount of money is spent in the name of poor. Thousands of books and hundreds of experts give their advice and solutions of this so called biggest social evil of our times. Nonetheless nobody including the proposed “beneficiaries” of these activities have considerably clear and shared view of poverty. Poverty on a global scale was a discovery of the post-world war 11 period. As Sachs and Rahnama have maintained (Sachs, 1992, p. 116),the concepts of poverty were quite different before 1940. As the same

* PhD Student, University of Karachi, Study Centre for Europe.
Correspondence: f.ahmed110@hotmail.com

authors point out however within Asian, African and Latin or native American societies as well as throughout most of European history vernacular societies had different ways of defining and treating poverty that accommodated visions of community, frugality and sufficiency. Whatever these traditional ways might have been and without idealizing them, it is true that massive poverty in the modern sense appeared only when the spread of the market economy broke down community ties and deprived millions of people from access to land, water, and other resources with the consolidation of capitalism, systemic pauperization became inevitable.

The concept of poverty was not as much acute in traditional societies as modern economized society created it. Traditional societies belong to complex networks of human relations and multilayer solidarities. Regardless of the extent to which a society was inattentive to its weakest members or even despotic, exploitative or discriminatory, the poor always considered members of the group. In normal times, all communities made adequate provision for those members who were unable to cater themselves. Medieval society, for instance, provided a berth for everyone if recognized as a member. Its structural design excluded unemployment and destitution (Schumpeter, 2006, p. 258). On the other hand, the poor were not considered despicable creatures, because of their indigence or their inability to work. They were perceived as quite respectable members who had only lost, or stood in danger of losing their berth. Finally even in societies of a stratified nature, the upper and lower strata had direct experience of each other. As a rule, communities assumed the responsibility of poor's relief within their boundaries, making it unnecessary for them to depend on formal, anonymous or alien sources of public assistance. Only in the case of general catastrophes (like famines, flood, droughts, war) was the voluntary aid to the helpless supplemented by formal or institutional help but in many cases these cataclysms even did not make traditional societies helpless because of their strong social bonds and their powerful culturally rooted economy that they did not need any institutional help. In traditional communities the greatest fear of the poor was not so much to lose whatever their little resources were, but to be totally abandoned (Rahnema, 1991, p. 15). The breakdown of the old, self-reliant and self-sufficient societies do not only represent the end of a world, but also marks the birth of a worldview where the poor becomes the abandoned, the berth less, the unprotected stranger, and the person without a community; in one word, the pauper, henceforth increasingly dependent, for his or her survival, on an outside institutional assistance. Neither the new poor, nor for that matter, the new society to which they belong, will ever be able to recreate, as they were, the old broken bonds which tied them together. Modernized form of poverty changed all these traditional ties. It has little to do with old, vernacular forms of poverty, because modern economized societies end to define their poor in accordance with their capacity to absorb commodities and services they produce, and in the context of a system equally

producing scarcity (Rahnema, 1991, p. 20). The modern poor are, thus no longer persons eventually lacking the minimum “necessaries” evoked by Adam Smith, but entire groups of people perpetually caught in the race between their imputed “needs” and their increasing lack of “resources”. On the one hand, they find themselves served by the nature, which gave them life and energy to meet their needs. On the other hand, they are artificially related to mythical life of luxury which only pollutes their imagination and sensitivities. So the socially constructed poor in the modern era are now all strangers within their land. Their predicament is that of modernized paupers whose vernacular and familiar networks of human solidarity have been replaced by the legal rights given them in the new scarcity based societies all of which are mainly regulated by the invisible and haunting laws of economy (Rahnema, 1991, p. 20).

As compared to traditional societies where poverty was not a major social and economic “problem” when the scarcities faced by the deprived were of a “natural” origin. So long as the communal ways of living together had not disappeared, vernacular communities were dealing with their poor in ways specific to their cultures. The “problem” has appeared due to economization of vernacular societies since society perceived ‘poverty’ as a serious threat to its own interests and stability. Economic discourse contends that the scarcity of goods and services, required to meet people’s needs is the main cause of poverty; hence, it calls for a rapid adoption of technologically advanced methods of maximized production. It argues that even if, at its earlier stages, such a goal is likely to create some social inequalities, the growth process will ultimately trickle down in time and expand its benefits to all the deprived. Practically, modern methods of production have indeed produced an unprecedented amount of “wealth” in terms of things, commodities and services, but only for those who have been privileged by economic growth. For the others the same process paradoxically create scarcity, that’s why we are seeing in modern societies there is indeed a most ostensible group of poor who live on public assistance or “welfare” of the state. These persons are officially classified as living below the poverty line, phenomenologically, these officially recognized poor constitute a separate category of people. Besides this category that officially recognized as poor, there is indeed another, perhaps much wider group of people who are “economically” better off, this second category of persons are, in actually, more typical of the modernized poor produced by economized societies for they generally have enough money to survive. Yet, their entire life is a degrading and often lost battle for earning more, in order to meet the rising cost of the many addictive needs produced by present consumer societies. While such spending is necessary for them to acquire a social ‘identity’ in ones circle, their possibilities of winning the rat race between their real purchasing power and their imputed needs become more limited. As these groups of people increase in number, modernized poverty trickles up the social up the social ladder to a great extent, due to this hor-

rible situation both categories of poor after disintegration of communities now totally dependent on state and market and indeed the first time both categories have indeed a number of rights which pre industrialized societies were never ready to grant them ,which modern state granted them. These rights generally recognize their equality with others. It defines their new rights based relationship with state which replaced traditional human relationships so the welfare of modernized poor depended on state rather than community.

Another thing which is important in order to understand this modernized concept of poverty is the changing perception of work. Traditionally, the rich, the powerful, and often the learned, distinguished themselves by having the others work for them. Work done under orders or involving income from trade, like work done with the hands, was servile, better left to the lowly or the slaves. Respected noble society worked only for pleasure, for the advancement of knowledge, for religious or public purposes, or eventually for one's household and friends. Even those who glorified the social and human values attached to work, did so for work done by others. Paid work done for an employer perceived itself as a sign of indigence and loss of berth (Illich, 1981, p. 102) Significantly voluntary poor resented working for money.

The emergence of work, as an economic value and a commodity to be exchanged against another, represented indeed a break with the past perceptions of work. With the rise of market economy, "noble" unalienating and unalienated work became less "valuable" than "productive" or 'useful' for the advancement of economy. At the same time, the wage laborer, realizing that economic development was henceforth dependent on the value of his/her work, perceived it as a major development has henceforth dependent on the value of his/her work, perceived it as a major weapon for reversing the exploitative capitalistic order of dependency employment, thus, became the new panacea against poverty. In pre-economized societies, the berthless destitution could at least one day dream of working for their own, free from the alienation of wage labor. Now wage labor was to engulf all the members of the society, including the new rich, accompanied by its glorifications the predominant source of value of societies. Alienating wage labor became integral component of the new "needs" and the "resources" required to meet the latter, thereby constantly increasing the number of dissatisfied and frustrated persons (eg. the "modernized poor"). Finally it caused an irreversible loss of autonomy for the greater number of people who had generally succeeded in meeting their needs out of their own systems of production (Rahnama, 1991, p. 22).

This poverty discourse institutionally implemented on a global scale after post World War II and over 1,500,000 million people, around two-third of the world population, are living in conditions of acute hunger, defined in terms of identifiable nutritional disease. This hunger is at the same time cause and effect of poverty, squalor and misery

in which they live. This globalization of poverty entailed by the construction of two thirds of the world as poor after 1945. If within market societies the poor were defined as lacking what the rich had in terms of money and material possessions, poor countries came to be similarly defined in relation to the standards of wealth of the more economically advantaged nations. This economic conception of poverty found an ideal yardstick in the annual per capita income. The perception of poverty on a global scale "was nothing more than the result of a comparative statistical operation, the first of which was carried out only in 1940"(Sachs, 1992, p. 9). Almost by two third of the world's people were transformed into poor subjects in 1948 when the world bank defined as poor those countries with an annual per capita income below \$100. And if the problem was one of insufficient income, the solution was clearly economic growth (Escobar, 1995, p. 4). When size of income is thought to indicate social perfection, as it does in the economic model of society, one is inclined to interpret any other society which does not follow that model as "low income". This way the perception of poverty on a global scale was nothing more than the result of a comparative statistical operation. As soon as the income had been established, ordered reigned on a confused globe: horizontally, such different worlds as those of the zapotec people of Mexico, the tuareg of north Africa and rajistanis of India and tharis of Pakistan could be classed together, whilst a vertical comparison of rich nations demanded relegating them to a position of almost immeasurable inferiority. In this way poverty was used to define whole people, not according to what they are and want to be, but according to what they lack and are expected to become. Economic disdain had thus taken the place of colonial contempt (*sachs*) This conceptual operation provided the moral justification for global and state intervention, where low income is the problem and the only answer can be more development. In industrial nation the enforced reorganization of many societies into cash economies was subsequently conduct like moral crusade at state and global level. Now I want to present the practical application of this global poverty discourse and its implications on indigenous societies with a reference to *tharparker* a desert area of Pakistan to show that how economization of indigenous society constructed the socially fabricated concept of modernized poverty which reached at its highest level in recent times in Pakistan.

Tharparkar is one of the 23 districts of Sindh province in Pakistan. It is headquartered at *Mithi*. It is the only fertile desert in the world. However there is no stream of fresh water in the region. The district consists of (*talukas*) of *mithi*, *chachro* and *nagar* and parts of the *diplo* and *umerkot*. The total area of the desert is 22000 square kilometers (Hasan & Raza, Migrations and Small Towns in Pakistan, 2011, p. 83). Traditionally the people of *Thar* are agriculturalist and herdsmen and the land tenure system which determines the relationships that make these two activities possible has always been similar to what it is today. Before 1960's the feudal system and its institutions had a power and

vitality. Apart from controlling almost every aspect of life in the desert, the waderas, thakurs and their appointees, patels, fulfilled a number of functions. The traditional "gowcher" or community grazing lands were protected from encroachment by them. So were the trees and shrubs that hold the desert oil together. They mobilized their "hans" and artisans for digging wells, desilting "tarais"(water ponds),and maintaining the infrastructure required for rain fed agriculture in the desert region. The main crop in *thar* has always been "bajra"(millet)(Hasan, Drought and Change, 2014). However, before the mid-sixties it was never sold for cash. The surplus produced in good years was stored for use in the future along with the stalk, which is excellent feed for cattle. Even grass, which used to grow up to five feet in good years, was cut and stored for emergency use in rainless years. A strict system of crop rotation was followed, giving a soil chance to breathe. Sowing is done in *thar* during the rainy season, between end June to middle of August. By November the harvesting is over, and by January dry seasons sets in. Cattle in the barrage areas was almost non-existent before the mid-sixties and *tharri* dairy products, mainly ghee, were very much in demand. Their sale provided the *tharris* with cash for the purchase of raw cotton, for their clothes. A part from this cash transaction the relationship between the desert and the barrage lands was entirely one of barter. Before the 60's there was almost no increase in the live stock population in *thar*. Breeding was strictly controlled as there was no market for *tharri* cattle. Sindh's urban centers had a population of less than one fifth of what it is today and their limited needs were by cattle from Punjab and Baluchistan. Villages in *thar parker* were physically similar to what they are today. However, the staple food was 'bajrey ki roti' and "dahi"(curd), both prepared locally. Similarly, blankets, shoes, clothes, clay utensils, agricultural implements, were all produced in the villages by hereditary artisans. Since villages were self-sufficient, and trade with cities was unknown, almost no mechanical transport linked the desert with the rest of the country. This was a time when *tharis* lived in their self-sufficient system and there was no such thing as poverty.(Hasan, Dawn, 1988)

Changes in the Desert;

During the Ayub era in 1960's major changes were attempted in the barrage areas. New varieties of seed and fertilizer were introduced. Loans for agricultural purposes were made available and mechanization of agriculture promoted .although these measures were not entirely successful during the tenure of Ayub government, they laid the basis for future development and made drastic impact on the people of *thar*, at the same time, development projects on a small scale, such as the erection of wind-mills for pumping out water and the building of dams in *nagar* neighbor district were under taken. In addition through the basic democracies system, people elected their own representatives. Through the basic democracies system, people were elected their own representatives. Through these developments the people of *thar*, so long

isolated from the mainstream economic and political life in Sindh, came into contact with the outside world. Industrially manufactured vegetable oil as a substitute for *thari* ghee, factory –produced shoes, cloth and agricultural implements, also made their appearance in *thar* along with tea, biscuits and white sugar. Shops in the villages opened in 1972, and the majority of them after 1980. Middlemen started visiting the desert to collect wool, animals and handicrafts and *tharis* started using city made shoes, clothes, soap, matches and other consumer items. Tea replaced *lassi* as the main beverage and wheat bread became popular. The changes described above were accompanied by changes in the barrage lands as well. Industrially manufactured ghee replaced *tharri* ghee. Mechanization of transport and improvement in roads, along with an increase in the price of agricultural produce, changed the economy of the barrage areas (Hasan, *Unplanned Revolution*, 2008). *Tharris* were now paid in cash for their labour and they needed this cash for purchasing the necessities of life. By 1974, one can safely say that *thar* had been colonized by the city markets forces and its dependence on cash was complete.

Impact of Drastic Transformation:

The disintegration of old order and introduction of cash as means of exchange have had an immense effect on traditional *thari* society. The *gowcher* land were brought under the plough and the system of crop rotation was discontinued. This was done due to increase in production of *bajra*. The encroachment on *gowcher* lands led to their deforestations, as shrubs and trees had to be burned to make agriculture possible. The old order having lost its authority could not prevent these encroachments, and it also failed to mobilize the people to protect and maintain the traditional infrastructure required for rain –fed agriculture. Thus *tarais*, wells and embankments are no longer maintained and restrictions on grazing in protected areas are ignored. In the sixties and 80's urban population of Sindh increased rapidly because of forced migration for labour and with it the demand for meat also increased rapidly. So, *tharparkar* became a major supplier of meat, and between 1961 and 1988, the animal population by over two hundred percent. The immense decrease in pasture land, the extension of *jumrao* canal and the encroachments on *gowcher* lands, along with the massive increase in population has led to the soil desertification in *thar*. These ecological changes have made the desert people incapable of withstanding dry years and so their economic dependence on the barrage areas and middlemen has increased. The barrage areas however, have also expanded and the last drought has shown that they cannot accommodate an exodus of people and animals from the desert as they could before. As a result, the animals had to be sold for a song and the people were forced to work as agricultural labour for less than half the normal wage. The drought has also made it clear that the migration of people and animals from the desert did not take

place because of lack of water as is generally believed but due to a lack of pastures for the animals. These physical and economized changes in the desert have made major social repercussions. The traditional social structure based on caste, feudal relations and the panchayats has broken down and the extended is under stress due to marketization of everyday life (Zaidi, 2015, p. 15).

References

- Escobar, A. (1995). *Encountering Development*. Princeton University Press.
- Hasan, A. (1988, September). Dawn. *Man Made Disaster*.
- Hasan, A. (2008). *Unplanned Revolution*. Oxford University Press.
- Hasan, A. (2008). *Unplanned Revolution*. Oxford University Press.
- Hasan, A. (2014, May 4). Drought and Change.
- Hasan, A., & Raza, M. (2011). *Migrations and Small Towns in Pakistan*. Oxford University Press.
- Illich, I. (1981). *Shadow Work*. Marion Boyars.
- Rahnema, M. (1991). Global Poverty: A Pauperizing Myth. *Interculture*, 14(2).
- Sachs, W. (1992). *The Development Dictionary* (First ed.). (W. Sachs, Ed.) Zed Books.
- Schumpeter, J. (2006). *History of Economic Analysis*. Taylor and Francis.
- sd. (234). *dsd*.
- Zaidi, S. A. (2015). *Issues in Pakistan's Economy*. Oxford University Press.