

What does poverty means to a poor?

By Shaista Malik

If we see the poverty related development discourse, we find several yardsticks and parameters to define and ascertain poverty. Experts, economists apply different techniques and set standards to do so. But what does poverty means to a poor? That is a fundamental question. This question is further related to some side questions that need to be addressed if we really want to take some concrete measures to reduce poverty.

Several studies show that poverty is more of a societal phenomena and not an individual one. Certain viable segments of society in Pakistan are now a days plunging into poverty trap loosing their viability because divide between have and have not is deepening in our society due to uneven development and livelihood opportunities and rising price hikes.

The ever-rising cost of living in terms of food, shelter and clothing is contributing a lot to this divide. It is unfortunate that our rulers in their elitist view see poverty in different way. They say poverty is on the decline as more motorbikes, cars and mobile phones are on the rise. They say that the purchasing power of the people is increasing but they forget it is the consumer financing by national and international banks that are trapping people into debt that further reducing their viability at one hand and on the other hand, unemployment and underemployment are becoming a major cause for reducing in incomes.

Income disparity is really an issue that needs to be taken into consideration while understanding poverty and conditions being faced by the poor. If we look at the data of those who are committing suicide each year tells us how fast people are getting frustrated due to income disparities that increase their vulnerability to poverty.

“Three of my children, all girls, are not going to school from the coming education year as I am unable to bear the burden of their education as I can hardly afford to half feed them,” said Arshad Ali, 43, a rikshaw puller.

Mr Ali does not own his rikshaw. He works on a daily commission basis. His earning drastically dropped down this year because of saturation in the business. He has six children.

“I hardly can earn Rs 70-80 a day after paying to rikshaw owner. When sugar is sold at Rs 25 per kilo, vegetable ranging between Rs 10-40 per kilo, wheat flour Rs 18-20 per kilo, edible oil and other necessary items are also in similar bracket, how can I even half feed my family of eight.”

Economic wizards set one dollar criteria for measuring poverty but Rs 70-80 is higher than a dollar but still the family is even food starved being half fed with the earning of single bread earner. This is not the only case millions of Pakistanis go half fed a day or get insufficient calories a day due to their limited incomes and poverty.

Could poverty ever end? What is the worst form of Poverty? Who helps people in poverty? Can we imagine the helplessness of a poor which he faces during whole life? These questions come in to the mind of every sane Pakistani. Do we have answers of these questions?

It is a common saying that Poverty means for a poor, a whole life struggle for survival which may be continued till his death. A new day sun rises with new challenges for a poor man due to lack of capital and resources. Though, Poor people all over the world are defined as income deprived people. However, the most critical situation of poverty is hunger. It is the Poverty which leads to people being unable to afford food and hence people go hungry.

According to World Bank indicators, Pakistan per capita gross national income (GNI) is US\$520. According to Human Development Report, Pakistan has seen a dramatic reduction in Human Poverty Index from 1997 to 2006. The percentage of HPI has fallen from 46.8 percent in 1997 to 36.3 percent in 2006, showing a decline of 10.5 percent over this period. The Household Integrated Economic Survey (HIES) 2005 showed that percentage of population living below the poverty line in urban and rural areas came down from 22.69 percent and 39.26 percent to 14.90 percent and 28.10 percent respectively.

Despite Pakistan is enjoying decline in poverty but still facing difficulties in accessing such human capabilities as education and health, which constitute critical aspects of human security, freedom and overall empowerment. Over the past two decades significant improvements in economic and social indicators of Pakistan did not show any progress in condition of masses.

Poverty in Pakistan is augmenting with increase in population. Growing pressure of population causes reduction in agricultural land, greater demand on limited water resources, from the expanding industrial and urban sectors, inadequacy of infrastructure. Still over 30% of the country's 150 million people survive beneath the poverty line. People are not only deprived of financial resources but they are also depriving of basic needs such as education, health, clean drinking water, and proper sanitation.

There are many causes in Pakistan for chronic poverty which are complex and multidimensional. Economic growth, poor governance as a result waning business confidence, low efficiency in delivery of public services, lower investment levels and growth are the primarily reasons for poverty. At the same time, highly unequal distribution of land, low level of human development, and persistent ethnic and sectarian conflicts are also obstacles to the achievement of long term sustained development. A major cause of mass poverty is huge government spending on military at the expense of health and education facilities.

Pakistan has grown much more than other low-income countries, but has failed to achieve social progress commensurate with its economic growth. The educated and well-off urban population lives not so differently from their counterparts in other countries of similar income range. However, the poor and rural inhabitants of Pakistan are being left behind. For example, access to sanitation in Pakistan in rural areas is 30% lower than in other countries with similar income.

No doubt Pakistan has manpower which has sufficient potential to work but due to limited access to education, health, and nutrition, undermines their capabilities, limits their ability to secure gainful employment, and results in income poverty and social exclusion; while also making them vulnerable.

Frequent number of incidents can be seen in the country as result of persistent poverty. A country driven by chronic poverty, illiteracy and greed, a few thousands rupees are enough to push someone to take the extreme step. Risky incident like Nassem Kausar case with her sister, six brothers, five sisters-in-law and two nephews living in Sultanpur Mor, a village in eastern Pakistan have sold their kidneys. They put in plain words that they did because of poverty.

Take another example of Samad Khan, who is a sole earner of his family, shifted his family to Islamabad to seek better life, education and health facilities compared to his native town. Day by day he faces difficulties which never end. His dreams never come true due to lack of money. Now he is helpless to send one of his child to auto mechanic workshop to help in earning money. His second son has become a conductor for financial support of him.

It is the poverty which become reason for suicide, we can find many unpleasant incident one example is 80 people combined suicide in Sindh in January 2003 alone. Suicide incidents are gradually rising with the increase of poverty ratio in Pakistan. The extent of poverty could be gauged from unemployed people to end their life. And in such situations, if a young man even could not find good meal for his whole family, he would readily accept for these extreme steps.

The last and the most important question how to tackle the challenge of poverty is now becoming a widespread agreement across the world; the problem is to find the best solution? Although it's not easy task, however, it is not impossible. This challenge needs to be addressed through integrated government policies and approaches at individual and collective levels. At the government level, financial incentives such as low-interest loans and tax breaks, Basic health care and literacy need more attention. All available resources should be mobilized and diverse modalities of collaboration be explored through extensive dialogue and consultations. The infrastructure and services associated with health and education can be funded. The government should concentrate on education, training and technical support that provide the basis for success. Improving the quality of peoples' lives and the ability to shape their own future are important

As a true Muslim this issue can be solved if we realise our social responsibility and obligation. Zakat and charities are simple way out for alleviation of this hunger and

poverty. There is so much wealth in the Muslim world that if all Muslims, on whom Zakat is due, pay their fair share and it is distributed honestly to the deserving than no Muslim will face extreme poverty and hunger. It will also help out the society from such extreme steps only due to acute poverty. Are we sincerely ready for this moral and social obligation?
