
Teaching poverty: a poverty of perspective

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Abstract: This paper inquires into the nature of economics taught in Indian schools by investigating the theme on poverty, covered routinely as part of economics courses. Our objective is to examine the lens through which issues on development are presented to students and the appropriateness of that frame in terms of epistemic and pedagogic relevance. The serious problem of perspective that the narrow positivist approach allows and promotes is glaringly obvious. The shortcomings lead to a discussion of alternative frameworks and approaches, which can essentially follow from our willingness to transcend the disciplinary boundaries.

Keywords: school economics; poverty; poverty line; capability approach; socialisation; preconceptions.

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1 Introduction

The social deliberations around the National Curriculum Framework (NCERT, 2005) an important document outlining what should be taught (and how) in Indian schools generated a wide-ranging discussion of ideas and expectations. Among the several suggestions on teaching of social science in schools, one observation is of particular interest to economics,

“The social science curriculum hitherto emphasised developmental issues. Teaching of social science has been linked up to the role of an individual in contributing to this ‘development’. These are important but not sufficient for understanding the normative dimension, like issues of equality, justice, and dignity in society and polity. In view of this gap, there is a need to achieve a shift in focus from utilitarianism to egalitarianism that would address the normative concerns.” [National Council of Educational Research and Training or NCERT, (2006c), p.3]

Though not directed at economics alone, economics courses in schools focussed on the issue of Indian economic development provide enough basis for this criticism.

As a brief background on school level economics in India, economics courses for the secondary (classes 9 to 10) and higher secondary (classes 11 to 12) level have evolved their own framework, with a focus on Indian economic development, which is a departure from the objectives and framework used by the National Council of Economic Education in the USA and adopted in many other countries of the world (Bose and Sardana, 2008). The first textbook introduced at the secondary level presented the imperative as “the basic ability to identify and use knowledge about the economy has become far too important to be left to the care of professional economists alone” with the task of “imparting knowledge and understanding of the structure of the Indian economy, and various problems and issues in development” [Majumdar, (1977), p.7].

While the focus on Indian conditions and attempts at understanding India’s economic development seems to be the appropriate starting point rather than abstract economic concepts, the perspective on development that these texts tried to foster has largely been unexamined. The apathy of the professional economists towards pedagogical issues meant that school economics saw very little research over the years. Given the inertia generally observed for textbooks to maintain a status quo, the textbooks grew in size across editions to accommodate the pressures of a changing economic environment, but without interrogating the framing ideas. It would not be surprising, therefore, if the interpretation of development in these texts is seen as narrow and utilitarian (economic growth as a best proxy for human development), a reminder of the development economics of the 1960s.

The present paper attempts to respond to this criticism through an enquiry into the nature of economics presently taught in schools. The research concentrates on a particular theme: the topic on poverty that can be expected to integrate normative dimensions such as equality, social justice and dignity quite naturally. The purpose is to examine the lens through which issues of development are being presented to students and the appropriateness of that frame in terms of epistemic and pedagogic relevance.

Beginning with a review of the poverty chapters (Section 2), the main component of the research consists of fieldwork in schools involving classroom observations and direct interactions with students (Section 3). The textual analysis confirms the overwhelming emphasis on the positivist approach, comprising the poverty line, measurement of poverty, and objective comparisons of poverty based on poverty ratios. In the development literature, the narrow poverty line approach has been challenged by more holistic and open frameworks with sound philosophical and epistemic foundation. In policy circles the poverty line has had a persistent run, but even here it has been shrouded in debates and controversies. The discussion on poverty in the school textbooks relies heavily on the narrow poverty line approach, without problematising the concept areas. Apart from the fact that this does not represent an honest view of the discipline, there are serious limitations of the positivist approach for pedagogic purposes, particularly in contexts where students and teachers have strong culturally shaped preconceptions on the subject. The serious problem of perspective that the narrow deterministic approach allows and promotes is glaringly obvious in a variety of evidence and most expressively through the students’ interpretations. People are regarded largely as a means to economic activity, and the poor are typified as unaware, lazy, and *responsible* for low levels of development, ideas that the present framework feeds rather than challenges. The need for a critical and holistic framework cannot be overstated. Section 4 discusses in some detail the key elements for an alternative framework drawing upon interdisciplinary research and practice on the subject. An alternate framework, it is argued, must:

- a integrate the normative concerns
- b promote conscious socialisation
- c include live policy debates embracing multiple perspectives such that development policy emerges as a contested terrain.

2 Poverty line: how relevant?

The following review is based on the present set of NCERT texts in Economics for classes 9 and 11. These texts are the official texts prescribed for all schools under the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) and by some of the sub-national boards. These also act as templates for private textbook writers. Poverty as a theme is covered in class 9 (NCERT, 2006a) and then again in class 11 (NCERT, 2006b). There is in general a uniformity in treatment across the grades with the coverage spanning four broad areas:

- a what is poverty and who are the poor
- b measurement of poverty and the number of poor
- c causes of poverty
- d anti-poverty measures and programmes.

Even at the first reading, one is acutely conscious of the disjuncture between the realistic portrayals of poverty frontloaded in the text and the conceptual idea of poverty line that suffuses the texts. The chapters start with case studies on the lives of the poor. In NCERT (2006a), the cases depict the distinctiveness of urban poverty vis-a-vis rural poverty, whereas in NCERT (2006b) the comparison is between the lives of the poor vis-a-vis the non-poor. These depictions are presented with boxed material on 'social exclusion', 'vulnerability' and scholarly quotes on 'what is poverty'. The bulk of the chapter, however, elaborates the poverty-line as a yardstick for the measurement of poverty. NCERT (2006a) devotes not less than 6 out of 11 pages in discussing poverty line, poverty estimates, poverty ratios for vulnerable groups, inter-state disparities and global poverty scenario all within the context of income poverty and poverty lines. Though NCERT (2006b) is somewhat more balanced, the concept of poverty line is at the core of discussions on poverty in the texts.

That the poverty line suffers from serious problems both in terms of method and meaning is well-known in economics. In India, poverty is presently estimated by fixing a poverty line based on a differentiated calorie-norm. A task force of the Planning Commission in 1979 defined the poverty line as that per capita expenditure at which the average per capita per day calorie intake was 2,400 calories in rural areas and 2,100 calories in urban areas. Average per capita expenditures incurred by that population group in each state which consumed these quantities of calories, as per the 1973 to 1974 survey of National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO), were used as the poverty lines. Based on the observed consumer behaviour in 1973 to 1974, the poverty lines obtained were Rs. 49.09 per capita per month in rural areas and Rs. 56.64 per capita per month in urban areas. These poverty lines were updated for the following years by simply accounting for changes in consumer price indices. The official poverty lines, it is well-known, are close to destitution levels. The poverty estimates obtained from the poverty

line are at great variance with the estimates of nutritional outcomes that other surveys provide. Patnaik (2004, 2007) has argued with evidence that rather than adjusting the 1973 to 1974 poverty lines for inflation, the method should be to check whether the lines so obtained still allowed nutritional standards to be met. By 2005, a rural person needed Rs. 19 a day to access 2,200 calories (NSSO data), while at the official figure of Rs. 12 she could obtain only 1,800 calories.¹ Thus, there is a wide divergence between the poverty lines and the original normative paradigm of calorie intakes.

Another problem is that the head count ratio ignores that individuals could be a little below the line or a lot below the line; and that the distribution of income among the poor may itself be very unequal.² Saith (2005, p.3) sums it up as “the highly arbitrary and restrictive nature of the poverty line...renders a good deal of poverty invisible, distorts the understanding of poverty and thereby does disservice to the cause of poverty reduction”.

It is natural to expect that these issues would be integrated in a discussion of poverty line.

More important is the questioning of the relevance of the income space itself for the measurement of poverty. The commodities over which a person has command are only a means to an end, and that end being able to live the kind of life that one values (Sen, 1999). Different people and societies typically differ in their capacity to convert income and commodities into valuable achievements; e.g., there is enhanced deprivation associated with pregnancy in women due to greater difficulty in maintaining employment and greater need for food. A meaningful conceptual framework should address these subjectivities. How then can we have a single poverty line as an evaluative measure? Where do we fix it?

Further, even though we may value real income as a means to overcome challenges, a person who spends money in order to fend off the dangers of crime and disease, is obviously less well-off than a person who enjoys good public health and security, and has no need for such expenditure. Thus, the perspective of functionings also brings into account the benefits a person receives from *public support*, not just private labour and the market. The capabilities approach, developed on the basis of functionings, has transformed the conceptualisation of poverty and the larger discourse on development. A person's ‘capability’ refers to the alternative combinations of functionings that are feasible for her to achieve. Capability is thus a kind of freedom: the substantive freedom to achieve alternative functioning combinations (Sen, 1999). The basic failure that poverty implies is not having the minimally adequate basic capabilities. A poverty line that ignores the essential multidimensionality and the individual characteristics cannot do real justice to the concerns relating to poverty.

It is true that a broader notion of deprivation based on the capability approach does not lend itself to precise definition and measurement on a cardinal scale as does the income poverty line. However, as a conceptual category it extends the idea of poverty to a much more meaningful level, both in terms of the value premises and as a lens for understanding the real picture of poverty. Why then has the capability approach not replaced the poverty lines in school texts? Even after the National Curriculum Framework 2005 stated in no uncertain terms the problems with the development framework, there has been little real shift reflected in these newly written textbooks.

Apple (2000), among others, has extensively written on the politics of selection of official knowledge and how difficult it is to bring a democratic curriculum into the education system. The serious problems with the poverty line approach notwithstanding,

it is still in use in conservative policy circles for poverty comparisons and forms the touchstone of the targeted spending programmes. What is taught is far from value neutral and it is perhaps inevitable that frameworks that examine the inherent subjectivities and privilege people's well-being will face the stiffest resistance.

It is also the case that the discussion on poverty line with its calorific standards, consumption expenditures and income scale – most of which is neither grasped by teachers nor students but impresses all the same – provides a veneer of *scientific objectivity* to the study of poverty. Economics is viewed largely as a science within the mainstream, and it is this view that we often want to portray for students. “While economics does not qualify as an exact science, paradoxically, it does adhere to the scientific method and the criteria of falsifiability, say, as defined by Karl Popper, whose formula of objective knowledge is used in practice by economists” Chandavarkar (2007, p.223). Inter alia, this has resulted in a huge premium on predictive economics and technical virtuosity as against *realism and relevance*. Within its own domain, “descriptive Economics has suffered from the imperialism of predictive economics” [Sen, (1980), p.363]. Somewhere it is a reflection of the general trend in economics that school texts should show persistent preoccupation with measurement questions at the cost of the ethical and egalitarian aspects of poverty.

Within the poverty line framework, it is inevitable that explanations for poverty will be restrictive, “Failure on both the fronts: promotion of economic growth and population control” along with “lack of adequate employment generation, unequal distribution of land and other resources and socio-cultural factors such as the profligacy of even the very poor to spend on social obligations and religious ceremonies” is how poverty is explained in the textbook [NCERT, (2006a), p.38]. The stereotyping is obvious as is the implied determinism. Empirically, the relation from economic growth to poverty reduction is an unsettled issue (Ravallion, 2001). Where economic growth has been instrumental in reducing poverty, it is because those countries have used the fruits of growth to expand the basic entitlements to food, health care, elementary education for all or what has been called growth-mediated security (Drèze and Sen, 1989). Besides, there are a large number of examples where direct public support was responsible for reducing poverty, e.g., China, Cuba, Chile, Jamaica, Costa Rica and Kerala in India, without waiting for economic growth to raise per capita incomes. In the absence of nuanced discussion that explains the more complex relation between economic growth and poverty, the analysis is deterministic.

The emphasis on population as a factor responsible for poverty reflects the influence of the Malthusian thought, which asserted the power of population greater than the power in the earth to produce subsistence. In reality, mitigating factors such as technological developments, productivity gains, changes in societal organisation, and changes in government policies, etc., have ensured that Malthus' prophecies never arrived. And yet, the influence of Malthus continues to live on both within sections of the academia and popular discourses within the society.

The last sections of the chapters discuss targeted anti-poverty programmes of the government including self-employment and wage employment. Public support is here limited to employment-based anti-poverty strategies, which is of utmost importance but certainly not all. There is one reference in NCERT (2006b) that there can be another approach to poverty, “a third approach to poverty is to provide basic minimum amenities to the people.” In a self-congratulatory note the text then states:

“India was among the pioneers in the world to envisage that through public expenditure on social consumption needs – provision of food grains at subsidised rates, education, health, water supply and sanitation – people’s living standards could be improved...It may be essential to briefly state that India has achieved satisfactory progress in many respects” (p.74).

The passing reference to basic amenities and public expenditure and a highly questionable statement on India’s success in achieving it means that these important dimensions will be completely ignored and misunderstood as the classroom transactions reveal in Section 3.

3 A view from the classroom: poverty as a challenge to development

The field work was conducted in the academic session 2008 to 2009 in two Central Schools, S1 and S2 in Delhi. Central Schools are among the better run government schools with regular teaching by a trained staff, and reasonable quality of physical infrastructure. There is a fair heterogeneity in socio-economic composition of students in the schools.

The instructor was trained in geography and teaches social science to class 9 students in S1. There was a relaxed atmosphere in the classroom as she recapitulated the lesson on poverty. She talked of income poverty line and then consumption poverty line as separate measures, not knowing where to place the calorific standards in the method. The identification of poor using the method was demonstrated by referring to the case study of Sivaraman and his family contained in the text [NCERT, (2006a), p.34]. As the income data was incomplete due to the uncertainty and seasonality of employment as the instructor correctly pointed out, the exercise remained incomplete.

The story of Sivaraman depicts the intra-household disparities, the anti-female bias in educational entitlements and the distribution of food. The instructor pointed to these prejudices in passing and steered the discussion towards human resources. The lack of schooling for girls through an under-utilisation of human resources was affecting ‘the development of the country’, she emphasised.

Table 1 Estimates of poverty in India

Year	Poverty ratio (%)			Number of poor (in millions)		
	Rural	Urban	Combined	Rural	Urban	Combined
1973–1974	56.4	49.0	54.9	261	60	321
1993–1994	37.3	32.4	36.0	244	76	320
1999–2000	27.1	23.6	23.1	193	67	260

Source: Cited from NCERT (2006a, p.33), Economic Survey 2002–2003, Ministry of Finance, Government of India

With the decision to educate/not educate being put firmly at Sivaraman’s door rather than the structural factors, characteristics of poor such as the propensity not to send girls to school can be sufficient explanations for poverty. The instructor’s reading of the poverty numbers seemed to point in that direction. Table 1 presents the estimates of poverty in India. Between 1973 to 1974 and 1993 to 1994, there was a significant decline in poverty ratios, and yet the number of poor in the country remained the same, the instructor

pointed out. The answer to the puzzle, she explained is in the high population growth, 'population is the mother of all evils'. The negative role of population growth was further reiterated in the discussion on what causes poverty. Population growth topped the list, followed by illiteracy, and unemployment.

All the causes of poverty cited above appear to be macro-level factors. And yet essentially as one observation from the classroom transaction, these are nothing but the traits of the poor! Population is a result of the propensity of the poor to have large families, just as illiteracy was an outcome of propensities that prevent the poor from sending children to school and unemployment a function of illiteracy. There was no mention of the structural factors. There was not even a reference to economic growth, the major cause of poverty emphasised in the textbook. Since the teacher's intuitive understanding implied poverty as responsible for low growth via low human capital formation, she consciously/unconsciously had overlooked the causal link in the reverse direction.

This reminds one of Milton Friedman's (1953, p.4) insight that, "laymen and experts alike are inevitably tempted to shape positive conclusions to fit strongly held normative preconceptions and to reject positive conclusions if their normative implications are unpalatable". Poverty as a theme harbours a large number of preconceptions and stereotypes that are at odds with disciplined forms of understanding. These prior notions are often very stubborn and require repeated questioning and sound reasoning in order to be replaced. We shall return to this point in Section 4.

Another mixed up causality emerged in the discussion of unhygienic living conditions of the poor. Lack of sanitation and drinking water, unhygienic living conditions, lack of health facilities were discussed as a *result* of poverty. With poverty measured uni-dimensionally as low income, other kinds of deprivations were ascribed to poverty. A discussion on public expenditure and public support which is completely missing from the chapter would have broken the causality now being implied. Without public provisioning of health, schooling, drinking water, sanitation even a reasonable income would be inadequate.

3.1 A classroom assignment: why should poverty matter?

In a combined interaction with the students of class 11 from the science, commerce, and humanities streams, the students were posed the question: Why should poverty be reduced? Our objective in asking the question was to get a sense of the lens through which students look at poverty.

- a Most answers suggested poverty as a hindrance to the country's development. "Poverty should be reduced because it is the main cause of backwardness of our country. It should be reduced for achieving better living standards" (Student, Class 11, Commerce) Another one says, "Poverty should be reduced to enhance the development of India and to strengthen our human capital. Poverty is a big obstacle to the growth of our country. One is not able to contribute to one's economy if one does not have any type of resource (resources such as health, education, etc.). So that is why the main task of India is to reduce poverty" (Student, Class 11, Science). An overwhelming majority of the answers speak of growth, which is regarded as synonymous with development, as the major objective of the Indian economy, and human capital as an essential ingredient in the pursuit of a successful development

trajectory. Poverty implies the low quality of human capital, which is seen as holding back growth.

- b A couple of students were able to identify the connection between the different dimensions of poverty, although in a limited sense: “Poverty does not come alone. It comes with many other problems like malnutrition, fewer chances of education, lower standards of living, etc., and then it will wholly affect the nation’s economy or the nation’s per capita income” (Student, Class 11, Commerce).
- c That poverty entails suffering, which is unfair in a democratic society like ours, comes across faintly in two responses. The better-reasoned answer is, “Poverty should be reduced to boost the standards of living of citizens of a country. It is unfair to let the economically weak people suffer from poverty. It is our duty to help them to live with a better standard of life. Also, it will provide all of us with a healthy social environment [in which] to live.” (Student, Class 11, Commerce) This student is cognisant of the suffering associated with poverty and of the obligation of citizens to prevent such suffering, although she also adds the instrumental motivation behind poverty reduction, that is, the need to create a ‘healthy social environment’.
- d The students have not attributed any direct responsibility to the state for ensuring that the basic minimum requirements of citizens are met. The role of the state is viewed in relation to the aspiration for growth. Indeed, a number of students have written to this effect: “Many policies of the government are spoiled only due to poverty, so it must be reduced” (Student, Class 11, Commerce).
- e One student (out of 32) mentioned fundamental rights in relation to the basic needs of citizens. “Poverty is the inability of a person to fulfil his basic needs. If he is not able to fulfil his basic needs, then he cannot spend his life properly. Otherwise also, it is the fundamental right of a person to fulfil his basic needs. Otherwise also, poverty is a situation from which everybody wants to escape” (Student, Class 11, Arts).

The dominance of the narrow developmental perspective in the students’ interpretation of poverty is unmistakable. The relation between poverty and equality, the human dimensions of poverty, and poverty as a violation of fundamental rights did emerge, but only as marginal voices. It was not incidental that the only student who mentioned the rights perspective was from the humanities stream. An overwhelming number of students look at poverty only within the utilitarian framework.

Economics courses have consciously or unconsciously contributed to what may be considered culturally shaped prior conceptions of students regarding the nature of poverty. Questions such as the following are never overtly explored in economics texts: Why does poverty matter? Why does inequality matter? Are these inequalities a permanent and inevitable feature of social life that reflects the differences in talent and ability among human beings? Or are these inequalities a consequence of our social positions and the differences in opportunities available to different people? And, what kind of economy do we seek? It is completely acceptable for an entire chapter on poverty to be written without any reference to the key ideas of dignity, social justice, and equality.

4 Towards an interdisciplinary framework and approach

4.1 Integrating normative ideas

The National Curriculum Framework (NCERT, 2005) refers to the Report of the Education Commission (GOI, 1964) which had emphasised that India should not be seen simply in terms of the developmentalist approach. The problem of this approach is that it treats poverty, illiteracy and Casteism as obstacles to national progress. This mode of thinking may suggest that the common illiterate masses have failed the nation. Reiterating the relevance of this observation, the National Curriculum Framework 2005 suggested an epistemic shift in focus from utilitarianism to egalitarianism that one has obviously failed to take into account.

4.1.1 How do we achieve the epistemic shift that would tie economic issues to normative concerns?

In the study of poverty, the capability approach provides a good starting point to integrate normative concerns and emphasise the importance of individuals as ends in themselves, rather than treating them merely as means to economic activity. The UN document on Human Rights and Poverty Reduction (United Nations, 2004) says “the capability approach to poverty provides a conceptual bridge between the discourses on poverty and human rights.” The capability approach defines poverty as the inadequate realisation of certain basic freedoms. The reason why the conception of poverty is concerned with basic freedoms is that these are recognised as being fundamentally valuable for minimal human dignity. But the concern for human dignity also motivates the human rights approach, which postulates that people have inalienable rights to these freedoms. If someone has failed to acquire these freedoms, then obviously her rights to these freedoms have not been realised. Poverty reduction is then a question of obligation, rather than welfare or charity.

To reiterate, the capability approach has great appeal for it is open, broad and inclusive. It takes care of the subjectivities, and diversity of peoples, cultures, and human necessities. As against the utilitarian framework which excludes important aspects of human life such as freedom, rights, quality of life, the capability approach in adopting a multi-dimensional space is inclusive. It is therefore suggested that school economics should adopt this approach for studying poverty and a more holistic conceptualisation of human development.

Many of the problems in framework and interpretation and the obvious gaps noted in the previous two sections can be avoided using the capability approach.

- The distinction between ends and means is central to this framework, and this we have seen is at the core of the errors noted in the classroom. Conventional criteria of economic success such as high economic growth rate are to be valued only as *means* to deeper ends. Poverty must be reduced because it deprives the individual *the right to life*, it is only of secondary importance that it would contribute to the development of the country. Basic education, good health are directly valuable as constituent elements of basic capabilities, though these capabilities can *also* help in generating economic success of a more standard kind, which in turn can contribute to enhancing the quality of human life even more [Sen, (1994), pp.3–4].

- It foregrounds human motivation. Human beings do care for others. They value *equity and fairness* in the society.
- A major contribution of this framework is that it shifts focus away from growth into distributive aspects of the growth story. In the analysis of food poverty, for instance, it stresses that the problem in most cases is not food shortage but the inability of groups of people who cannot access food irrespective of food availability because of exchange entitlements (adverse shifts in exchange values of entitlements, lower wages, higher prices).

This brings us to the other important shift in framework required when talking of poverty. The *role of structural factors* needs to be elaborated with clarity and emphasis. The hold of stereotypical and simplistic explanations that portray poverty as a personal failing is very strong, as we shall further note in the next section. On the other hand, the structural factors and those specific to the Indian situation are not properly discussed.

The textbooks take cognisance of high growth and education as important for poverty reduction: implied is that high growth would generate adequate employment opportunities, while education equips people with adequate employable skills. The underlying conception of the economy is one dominated by the formal service sector. In contrast, the vast majority of people in India, particularly the poor are still dependent on farm and informal sector incomes so that formal education has little to contribute directly towards income generation. For the landless manual labourers, one of the most vulnerable groups, getting regular wage employment at reasonable wages is the real bottleneck. For the small and marginal farmers, who constitute the bulk of farmers, issues like access to credit, debt relief, farm support prices, public procurement and distribution, public investment in agriculture are of immediate significance. A vivid example of the link between these structural factors and poverty is the spurt in farmers' suicides across several states in India due to high indebtedness. The structural factors have worked against certain groups to push them into poverty and deprivation. The report of the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector notes,

“Increased liberalisation and globalisation have led to a shift in cropping pattern from staple crops to cash crops like oilseeds and cotton, requiring high investments in modern inputs and wage labour, and increased credit needs...Small and marginal farmers had hardly any access to institutional finance and had to depend heavily on private moneylenders who charged very high rates of interest. When crops failed or prices went down they had no means to repay the loans, which drove them to the wall. Further, unlike industrialists farmers do not have debt relief under any law. In most cases the suicide victims were small and marginal farmers who could not sustain frequent price shocks.” [GOI, (2007), p.135]

Thus, poverty can be traced back to structural factors in either the economy and/or to several interrelated institutional environments that serve to favour certain groups over others, generally based on gender, class or caste.

4.2 *Towards conscious socialisation*

An objective of the school is to transmit concepts, network of concepts, conceptual frameworks, and disciplinary forms of reasoning to their students. On the subject of the poverty, there are deeply entrenched positions that often clash with disciplinary forms of

reasoning, particularly the liberal perspectives. If the instruction is weak and unconvincing, the already developed intuitive theories and preconceptions would be very difficult to replace.

What are the stereotypes and preconceptions that one can expect to confront on the subject of poverty? At least two are very powerful and pervasive.

- a A fundamental reason assumed to be responsible for poverty is the un-progressive attitudes and lack of awareness of the poor. The hold of this logic extends to every aspect of social and economic life, and crops up repeatedly during classroom discussions:

“Poor people don’t want to send their children to school. They have no sense about the benefits of education. They would rather send them to work.”

“These people do not want to progress.”

“Poverty is because the poor have seven eight children. They need to be made aware of the benefits of small family.”

“Poor are unable to benefit from the government programmes because of the lack of awareness.”

Poverty is thus understood to be because of individual pathologies.

Cultural attributes have been stressed by conservative theorists and policymakers in other societies as well. Rising rates of divorce, female-headed single parent families, teen pregnancy, drug/alcohol misuse, and criminal activity are said to reflect dysfunctional attitudes and values, relative to mainstream society, about family, education and work. These attitudes are passed onto subsequent generations leading to a vicious cycle of poverty from which few escape (Rodgers, 2000 cited in Jordan, 2004). It is the deficient character of the poor along with their deviant behaviour and the resultant self-reinforcing environment that restrict their access to economic viability and success.

But to what extent is this true? Research evidence clearly rejects the cultural/behavioural arguments. In an empirical study of the causes of poverty, Jordan (2004) used a mix of cultural and structural variables to explain poverty but finds that none of the so-called cultural variables explained poverty either independently or in conjunction with structural variables, whereas all the structural variables used in his model are significant. It is however possible that structural variables condition the environment in which cultural/behavioural adaptation develop.

- b A second related preconception relates to the incentive problem of any social security and redistributive arrangement in favour of the poor. In a discussion among the students of class 9, one student (A1) raised the question:

A1 why does not the government print money and give it to the poor?

A2 Can it print as much money as it wants?

A3 It would lead to higher prices.

A3 Everyone would have more money... There would be inflation.

A4 People will not work.

Many other students joined: They will get money. Why work?

At this point, one student brought in the analogy of mid-day meal scheme in schools. “Poor children come to school to eat and not study”, he said critically.

It was heartening to see the students thinking and drawing connections. They were discussing real issues, which they hardly have a chance to. And yet the preconceptions were quite uniform: People should work hard and not ask for hand-outs.

The students were saying what we have often heard economists express on issues relating to redistribution: equity would harm efficiency, particularly through the erosion of incentives. Surely, the connections are far more complex than that. Paying attention to equity may, in many circumstances, help promote efficiency, because people’s behaviour may depend on their sense of fairness and their reading as to whether others are behaving fairly.

The macro argument is as follows: Poverty hampers the ability of society to materially reproduce itself, both on the production side (under-fed and ill-housed workers are much less productive than their potential) and on the demand side (reduce the size of the potential market). Social justice is essential for real efficiency. But most important, social justice is an important objective in itself: it is a constitutional value irrespective of what it does to efficiency and should be pursued.

The school curriculum through *conscious socialisation* can help break these dominant stereotypes, which survive far beyond school, and continue through college and university education. School knowledge must socialise children into a culture of concern and a search for collective solutions (Kumar, 1992). For the subject of economics, this implies that the courses should seek to foster sensitivity and empathy combined with a high degree of rigour in examining an issue.

The resources for such an endeavour could be wide-ranging and should be selected in order to draw out what students think, besides engaging them in an interesting manner, without being didactic. A few activities that were tried with the students are described below:

- a One promising avenue is to break out of textbook centring to include a wide variety of experiences like survey, discussion with people of diverse backgrounds, field visits, etc. (see Box 1).
- b Dasgupta (2007, pp.1–6) presents a narrative of Becky and Desta, two young girls born into life situations that are polar opposites. Such resources, we found was useful to challenge the assumption that ‘lack of awareness and motivation’ is the main cause for poverty and draw students’ attention to structural factors in the economy and inter-related institutional factors. Sociology classrooms use a more elaborate tool, The Life Happens Game (Ore, 1998) to help students understand how poverty works and get them away from this notion that the poor are poor because of some flaw in themselves.

Box 1 What does it mean to live in poverty?

Each student in a cohort of 40 in Class 9 in S1 conducted a detailed interview with a working class person in the neighbourhood. The students spoke to people with different employment profiles— housemaids, gate-keepers, migrant labourer, launderer, sweepers, rickshaw-pullers, potter, petty traders (fruit and vegetable vendors), bus conductors, and an unemployed youth in an open-ended interview.

The initial questions related to the individual's incomes and the other sources of income in the family. This was juxtaposed with questions on the expenditures that the families incur so that students came up with a detailed statement on various expenses including food, house rent, clothes, soap, oil, fan, consumer durables, education and health related expenditure. Students then drew conclusions on the living standards based on the expenses that the families could afford and were incurring, and not just earnings.

One student compared household income with the poverty line basket. Based on the comparison of actual income, its purchasing power, he found that the family despite being above the poverty line officially live in poor conditions. "The government should again think on poverty line measurement and should remake new measurement line" the student concluded.

For the most part, the questions on poverty were extended to include housing, health, aspirations of children's education, regularity of employment, ownership of assets, etc. Students found that hunger was a regular part of the lives of the poor. There were an astonishing number of cases of chronic illnesses such as rickets and tuberculosis and old-age ailments among families who were also noted to be incurring substantial private expenditure on it. Students wrote about disruptions in electricity and scarcities of drinking water, and lack of housing. It emerged that poverty is much more than lack of income.

By and large, the students tried to enter the respondents' situations and to imagine what it would be like to be in their position. There were statements that spoke with a hint of fairness "I think his salary should be increased as he does a lot of hardwork as far as I can see." They acknowledged that the poor are 'found in large numbers' and their conditions were 'due to destiny' (factors outside their control) which was not quite accurate but surely a step forward. On the link between poverty and education, a major area of stereotyping and reductive reasoning, a student inferred based on the interview that "even if people are educated it is not necessary for them to get good jobs and good income or salary." They were more understanding of why people discontinued their studies, how difficult it is to continue studies or why the poor are not sending the girls to school. "Buying books and other things for school going girls is a luxury he cannot afford" writes one student. Not to discount the anti-female bias, another student adds "Only his son is studying in Class 4 and his daughters do all the household chores and do not go to school, they take care of their brother and their grandmother who is a tuberculosis patient and grandfather is very old man of 80 years." Students took in their stride the anger that they faced, when they tried to talk down or influence the other person's decision on children's schooling. "He was so angry with this education topic. There was nothing more to convince him about educating his young ones."

A surprising finding for the students was that none of the respondents identified as poor by them were receiving the benefits of the targeted anti-poverty programmes. The students came up with a profusion of recommendation for the government to act upon. The daily struggles in the lives of these poor people had touched a few young minds.

- c The medium of films such as *Do Bigha Zameen* (1953, Directed by Bimal Roy), *Kabuliwala* (1961, Directed by Hemen Gupta) show the many layered nature of poverty and provides useful openings to discuss issues of land and credit, the most important structural determinants of backwardness, in fair bit of complexity. The intuitions behind concepts such as vicious cycle of poverty and cumulative causation (that those who already have wealth, education or power have the means to create even more for themselves) are clearer, if introduced through such contextualisation.

4.3 *Development policy as a contested terrain*

The discussions on anti-poverty measures and development policy have routinely been presented as information on programmes conceived by the government with people as the willing beneficiaries of these schemes. A sanitised and one-sided view of policy is thus what the students receive from the textbooks, which is actually inconsistent with the lived experiences of many of the children, particularly rural children who have a more complex understanding of the working of local level institutions, of power and patronage. It also clashes with the images that the students return with when exposed to real poverty.

Rather than a simplistic view of state policy, at this level one should be able to dwell on how state policy is actually formulated, and in the process also stress the role of people's agency and the potential and need for collective action. Contemporary debates on development policy present a lot of possibilities to understand these dimensions. The proposed food security act in India could be a relevant case study that relates hunger and poverty to public policy and public action. The food security act is meant to guarantee freedom from hunger as a legal right and entitlement for all. In a country where half of all children are underweight, it is widely agreed that the impact could be far-reaching. And yet, there has been strong opposition to this bill. Voices within the government have indicated that additional expenditures for a universalised food security act are simply unfeasible within the present fiscal policy framework. Rather, targeting the beneficiaries, it is suggested, would serve the purpose of food security as well as sub-serve efficiency of public expenditure. But then who should be targeted and how? Below poverty line (BPL) surveys have been fraught with problems of exclusion. According to the 61st round of the NSSO, among the poorest 20% of rural households in 2004 to 2005, barely half had a BPL Card! While there has been trenchant criticism of the government's targeting approach by activist groups, the government is trying an alternative BPL survey methodology.

When the notion of poverty line is discussed through such cases, it is more likely to promote reflection on the narrow view of poverty than is the case at present. While we have proposed an alternate conceptual framework to understand poverty, it would be fair to discuss the narrow poverty line at some point for the purpose of reflection. Any social phenomena, any public policy affects people differently. Learning about multiple perspectives is holistic as identification and utilisation of various sources /points of view will help develop analytical and critical thinking. What are the different angles to the debate? Whose aspirations does the policy represent? Such questions could be useful pointers to the political economy of public policy.

Finally, these contemporary debates with their associated struggles also bring home that most often there are long-drawn battles involved in pushing through a progressive law or securing rights for ordinary people. Employment Guarantee Act (2005), a law which obliges the state to be the employer of last resort, today seen as a major game changer in providing rural livelihoods came about as a result of prolonged struggles by a variety of non-state actors – civil society groups, grassroots movements, intellectual pressures, mobilisation by political parties, and judicial intervention. With a shift towards the capability approach and the rights perspective, it is imperative that how rights are secured and defended and the possibility of collective action be integrated in the discussion.

5 Conclusions

Seeking guidance from the Constitutional vision of India of a secular, egalitarian and pluralistic society, certain broad aims of education based on equality and social justice have been identified in National Curriculum Framework 2005. Economics courses in schools have remained impervious to these movements, as the analysis in this paper made clear. School economics has ignored important advances within the discipline that has sought to release economics from its narrow positivist methods and has sought to present an alternative to conceptualise human development within an open, broad and inclusive framework. We have reiterated that the present narrow deterministic framework centred on economic growth and income as the evaluative space is based on weak epistemic and philosophical foundation. Further, in regard to its pedagogic function it is completely unsuitable for fostering either rigour of understanding or empathy towards others. An alternative approach would require radical changes that have to necessarily draw on interdisciplinary research from the interface of economics and philosophy, sociology, and political economy.

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Notes

- 1 The official explanation for this trend says that people's preferences have changed in favour of goods with lower calorie intake. Others like Patnaik argue that as prices for non-food essentials increased but incomes did not increase (or increased but at a slower rate), people started reducing expenditures on some food items.
- 2 In the literature, measures like the Poverty Gap Index or the Foster-Greer-Thorbecke class of poverty measures capture poverty depth and inequality, respectively.