

Invoking Everydayness in Poverty Studies in India

A Note on Approach and Method

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The field of research on poverty is served mainly by scholars who are influenced by the demands of measurement rather than contextualisation. This has led to a lack of focus on the relational and political side of the problem of poverty, as well as on the lives of the poor. The domain of strategic decision-making of the poor has also not been adequately researched. This paper calls for further exploration of this domain by employing a combination of methods/techniques used in the field of social anthropology. Such depictions of the poor and of poverty would not only correct a bias in the orientation of studies on poverty, but would also serve a political end by possibly dislodging our complacent attitudes towards poverty and destitution.

Any scholar venturing into the fields of political economy, development studies, economics, political science, democracy, and socialism has to willy-nilly engage in discussions related to the marginalised, the deprived, the downtrodden, the destitute, in short, the poor. These discussions are focused mostly on issues of resource distribution, equity, welfare assistance, market opportunities for the poor, financial prudence, etc. These engagements are either direct or indirect, depending upon a host of factors, such as disciplinary inclinations, the theme being researched, or the need for making the social sciences more relevant and useful. Yet in strange ways, the poor remain the most poorly represented of the lot of human subjects. Their voices are drowned out in the din of voices of scholars and practitioners claiming to represent the poor in India. These disciplines offer the poor an opportunity to be cast in different hues and colours. The statistical exercise of aggregation in narratives based on numbers also renders them unrecognisable. They become average types, and lose their identity and individuality. A significant part of social policy is based on this exercise of measurement. Poverty research is a science that usually elevates measurement and disregards contextualisation (Harriss 2007). And economists are clearly the leaders in this field. This happens in the other social sciences as well, as real people are often lost in descriptions of patterns, statuses, roles, and other concepts (Lewis 1967).

Some studies have attempted to capture the everydayness and relational aspects of poverty in India, such as studies by Leela Gulati (1981), Jan Breman (2007) and his earlier works, Beck (1994), Dube (1998) and Drèze (1990). Dube's (1998) study traces the history of deprivation and powerlessness experienced by an untouchable family over five decades. Gulati's (1981) study is another outstanding account of the travails of working women trying to overcome poverty and destitution. Drèze's (1990) work on widows, and the poverty and deprivation in which they live, combines quantitative and descriptive materials in an effective way. It is based mainly on an analysis of government data, but uses profiles of widows and personal insights to bring out the social and relational conditions of widows in Indian society. Beck's (1994) work on poverty in Bengal blends survey data with a very good appreciation of the issues of everyday life based on in-depth fieldwork, and hence has been able to focus beautifully on the relational and political dimensions of the life of the poor. Last but not the least, Breman, who has been the pioneer in the field of poverty

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studies in India, has combined profiles of the poor with formal analysis based on survey data and other forms of data. Other important academic studies that have used mainly quantitative methods, but have also used qualitative and everyday information in more limited ways, are by Krishna (2003) and Lanjouw and Stern (1998). Enlightening poverty studies by Krishna (2003, 2004) and Krishna et al (2003, 2004) have enabled us to understand the important reasons that lead people to either escape or fall into poverty. But these studies do not provide us with live descriptions of the poor nor of their relationships with the non-poor. This is an unsatisfactory state of affairs because we lack deeper, more detailed profiles of the poor and the destitute in India. We still know little about their decision-making processes. Saith and Tankha's (1972) conceptual study examines decision-making in poor peasant households. There is, however, no notable work to my knowledge that views economic decision-making by the poor as a subset of the political and strategic choices available to them in the sociopolitical environment of the village or the community.

The policy world is significantly influenced by literature that focuses on the measurement of poverty. This has led to significant debates on numbers and methodologies, and their comparability, pertaining to the enumeration and aggregation of the poor. This debate itself is profoundly political (Harriss 2007). Due to this focus on measurements, other social scientists have fallen behind their economist friends when it comes to discussions on poverty. Their own disciplinary predilections are also responsible for this situation. For example, the sociology in India has been far too preoccupied by caste, social anthropology by tribe, and political science by formal institutions of state and democracy. Another related reason is a methodological one that pertains to the social sciences other than economics. The difficulty of defining poverty is an acute one for other disciplines because they do not easily agree on the economic and technical measurements of poverty. This has led to a lack of focus on the relational aspects of the lives of the poor and the non-poor, and to a neglect of an understanding of the processes that produce poverty and the poor (Harriss 2007; Breman 2007). Regarding mainstream poverty research, Harriss writes:

The core of their arguments is that poverty becomes a tangible entity through its conceptualisation in mainstream poverty research. It is a state that is external to the people affected by it: individuals or households fall into it, or are trapped in it, or they escape from it. It is not seen as the consequence of social relations or of the categories through which people identify and act upon in the social world. Notably, the way in which poverty is conceptualised over time separates it from the social processes of the accumulation and distribution of wealth, depoliticising it. And depoliticisation is, of course, a profoundly political intellectual act (2007: 3).

Robert Chambers (1992) has attempted to separate the different forms of deprivation from the technical definitions and measurements of poverty that are usually considered to be synonymous with it. He regards technical definitions as only some ways of classifying and measuring poverty, but does not consider that these definitions by themselves exhaust the

entire domain of poverty. This problem has been recognised by many and some of them have tried to correct it by using different techniques to study poverty. This attempt led to a workshop and then a book edited by Pranab Bardhan (1989), *Conversations between Economists and Anthropologists*, which attempted to discuss the advantages of both kinds of research. But Breman (2007) says that nothing concrete has come out of this attempt. The World Bank also came out with a book, *Voices of the Poor*, which attempts to capture the narratives of the poor. However, this alternative approach to knowledge as the basis for poverty action has been largely ignored in the field (Harriss 2007).

Since the focus has moved away from everydayness poverty studies no longer adequately illuminate the lived experiences of deprivation and nor do they focus enough on strategic decision-making by the poor. This scenario can be appropriately amended by resurrecting the everyday life of the poor in the social sciences. This will work to the benefit of both the social sciences and policymaking. It will also help us understand the quotidian processes, strategies, and politics at work that enable the poor to eke out a living. This is critically important because attempts to remove poverty sometimes undermine the quotidian processes that are helpful to the poor but without creating adequate new support structures.

Theoretical Field of Everyday Life

An analysis of everyday life involves a discussion of the ordinary and routine things of life. It is understood mainly as a narrative from the point of view of an individual or individual household. In an extended sense, it can also be a constellation of narratives about any social space where interactions in daily life take place. It is an exposition of the everyday strategies and machinations employed by members of a household while attempting to earn a living. Everyday life is a heterogeneous and incompatible bundle of cultural values, norms, mores, and activities, and is not easily captured by most formal concepts of the social sciences. It is highly mercurial and changeable for all, but probably the most in the case of the poor because they do not have adequate control over resources.

It is important to understand the full meaning and significance of everyday life in all its richness and complexity. Borrowing from Nietzsche's idea of the everyday as an "eternal recurrence", Lefebvre defines everyday life as repetitive, diffused, endless, and marked by cycles of birth and death (Gardiner 2000). It is influenced by customs and habits, and characterised by particularism. In the premodern world, everyday life was constituted mostly in response to the rhythms of the natural world. While discussing different everyday thinkers, Gardiner makes it amply clear that in the modern world, apart from the influences of the natural world, everyday life is conditioned by the effects of technology, work, and production (ibid). Agnes Heller considers that everyday life has been treated as trivial, parochial, and low and has been insulated from the higher domains, such as science, art, and religion in the modern world (ibid). The hidden possibilities and transformative potential of everyday life were rarely appreciated until

some scholars looked at it as a mechanism of dis-alienation in the neo-capitalist world. Lefebvre (1991) and Heller (1984) are convinced of the transformative potential of everyday life. Labour is alienated in the capitalist form of production, and both Lefebvre and Heller hope that dis-alienation will unleash the potentialities of everyday life (Gardiner 2000). Heller, however, understands that transformation can be brought about only after one has made space for oneself in this world. She defines everyday life as that part of human life that helps an individual reproduce not only him but also one that makes social reproduction possible. Heller writes:

Man is born into a world which exists independently of him. This world presents itself to him as a ready-made datum; but it is in this world that he must support himself, and put his viability to the test. He is born into concrete social conditions, concrete sets of postulates and demands, concrete things and concrete institutions. First and foremost, he must learn to 'use' things, to acquire the customs and meet the demands of his society, so that he may bear himself in a way that is both expected and possible in the given circumstances of that society (Heller 1984: 4).

To eke out a living, one should be ready to use this "ready-made datum" of the world. This datum would necessarily not be logical and linear, and could even be incompatible and inconsistent. Learning to live with this incompatibility, or using this incompatibility to one's advantage, is the crux of everyday life.

One learning that emerges from the theoretical literature on everyday life is that poverty studies should be able to capture the extraordinary array of the everyday strategies and actions of the poor who struggle with poverty. That is why I want studies on poverty to be located at the confluence of the analyses of the structure and everyday lives of the poor. This approach, if followed, would offer considerable advantage over the systemic and structural approaches to the study of the poor and of poverty. However, neither of these two approaches is adequate by itself. By knowing the everyday life of a few people located in different positions in the social structure, we cannot claim to know the problem entirely. Heller (1984) confirms this when she says that by knowing the everyday life of a serf or a knight, one cannot fully express or grasp the nature and significance of the structure of feudalism. The structure needs to be grasped separately. A comprehensive study of the poor and of poverty cannot be complete without reference to the social structure in which both the phenomenon of poverty and the poor are located. There is a need to study both the structural conditions as well as the everyday life of the poor. The influence of structural factors on the fate of the poor will always exist, but many amongst the poor, through their everyday knowledge and practices, make signal differences to their own lives and manage to escape the trap of poverty. That is why we occasionally come across the proverbial "rags to riches" story. Certeau (1988) talks about the space for creativity at the level of subjects and that is why distinguishes between strategy and tactics. On the other hand, there are others who, through their daily practices of life, make it much more difficult for themselves to live peacefully. This is why Galbraith (1979) talks about the examples of case poverty, it means that

the individual poor could be found even in midst of general prosperity and affluence in society.

Scope of Quotidian Lives and Living

To partly address this problem, I want to identify threads in strategic and political content of the relationship amongst and between the poor, as well as their relationship with the higher classes. Hence, I had proposed the concept of the "culture of daily life (CDL)" to describe quotidian conventions and strategies that emerge under specific structural conditions (Kumar 2009, 2010). These processes and conventions meet the basic requirements of resources and living in the lives of the poor. I am purposefully using the word "living" in place of other possible words, such as livelihoods and subsistence, mainly because everyday lives do not just support livelihoods but also provide a frame of meaning to the poor to make their lives less miserable and more acceptable to them. Living requires the mobilisation of physical, moral, social, and emotional resources needed for leading a peaceful and adequately human life. A word of caution is relevant here. In this paper, I am not referring to leisure, cultural activities, aesthetics, etc, as being constitutive of living.

While discussing CDL, the aim is to understand the daily lives of the poor in the natural conditions of their everyday existence. CDL is not an appropriate concept for explaining extraordinary conditions in a fully blown conflict or when the polarisation of classes has already taken place. CDL is close to the concept of habitus posited by Bourdieu (1977), which emerges under the influence of structural and cultural factors. It is a system of durable "dispositions" that influence individuals, but without determining the content of individual actions. It is an acquired scheme of perception, thought, and action; it develops under the influence of the structures of economy, polity, and society, endowing people with practical skills, but without affecting them all in a similar manner, and hence leading to different outcomes (ibid).

I conceived this idea while doing ethnographic fieldwork in a village called Subhanpura (name changed) in Kanpur Nagar district in Uttar Pradesh. The main fieldwork in the village was done during the period from September 2004 to June 2005, and was followed up for one week each year until 2008. Subhanpura is a multi-caste village. The Thakur caste, the majority one, is also the dominant caste in the village. The other main castes living in the village are Nai, Kumbhar, Baniah, Pal, Rawat, Vishwakarma, Kahar, Mali, Jamadar, Swarnakar, and Pasi. While living in the village, I regularly encountered different views and attitudes that are typically expressed by the same set of people facing any specific set of conditions. At one level, people were averse to, and in conflict with, another group of people, or an individual, or a social situation. At another level, people were inclined to cooperate and work together with/for them. Based on this situation, I understood that the poor needed to be open for cooperation, despite underlying contradictions and conflicts with people either from one's own ranks or with people from other classes. This duality in the strategies of the poor affected their approach and

orientation to community members and to their superordinates in the class structure. There were multiple variations of this essential division, with each individual essentially being different and adopting an orientation that suited him/her. This situation had a temporal dimension and was subject to change. The orientation of people was also subject to change, depending on the sites of association and the issues at stake. This dichotomy is, in some instances, found to be so wide that it becomes difficult to believe that these roles are performed variously by the same person.

While discussing everyday politics, Kerkvliet (2009) gives a more nuanced picture. Apart from everyday forms of resistance, he also refers to everyday forms of support and compliance, as well as everyday forms of modification and evasion. He distinguishes the latter from everyday forms of resistance in that everyday forms of modification and evasion (the latter) only aim to “cut corners” and to evade resistance or conflict (ibid). I find this taxonomy of everyday politics a complex variation on the fundamental dichotomy of everyday forms of conflict and cooperation. CDL incorporates elements of both conflict and cooperation across and within groups and classes. It is not the culture of a group, but of many groups and classes put together. By its very nature, it is associational in orientation. Michael Walton (2007) offers a similar concept when he talks about culturally shaped inequality traps that influence the human behaviour of the poor. He describes inequality traps as self-enforcing equilibria, sustained either by rational behaviour or by interactions across unequal social groups. Apart from cultural processes, there are also economic and political processes involved in maintaining this equilibria (ibid).

In normal conditions when inequalities exist but have not yet obstructed cooperation, it is not uncommon to find poor people surviving through vertical networks. In some instances, there is substantial dependence on vertical networks, almost to the exclusion of any support coming from their ranks. These are exceptional cases of patron-client relationships. In their own communities, such people are known as agents, attendants, or, in extreme cases, as spies, acting on behalf of some other class. A few individuals in Subhanpura, had a similar reputation.

I found multiple forms of inequality in Subhanpura, but this inequality had not yet reached a point where the polarisation of classes had taken place or where serious catastrophic conflicts had occurred. Indeed, it is rare to find serious conflicts in any place, as inequalities are mostly not cumulative and do not add up neatly. The substantive point underlying the argument is that people use both horizontal as well as vertical networks for earning their living. Space for building individual relationships and personal bonds across classes is found in most social contexts, but is influenced by the structural conditions of inequality in the community. The cleavage between classes is mostly not prohibitive of cooperation across it. Notwithstanding structural contradictions with other classes, the poor mostly develop everyday ways of cooperating with others outside of their own class. The other group also needs to cooperate in order to accomplish many of its tasks that require cross-class cooperation. In an earlier paper, I had shown how this happened

by citing examples of traditional jajmani relations and tenancy relations in a north Indian village (Kumar 2010). Scott (1976) talks about exchanges between elites and peasants. Some of these exchanges are balanced, while others are exploitative, as they do not adhere to the moral norms of the community that call for balanced exchange and adequate provision for the subsistence of the poor (ibid). Scott also refers to cooperation among the ranks of the poor, describing processes of self-help amongst small farmers. In my village, I found people treasuring inter-class relationships and nurturing them over generations (Kerkvliet calls this everyday form of support).

Everyday Cooperation and Resistance

Ochoa (1999) also talks about everyday forms of cooperation between Mexican Americans and the new Mexican immigrants aimed at facilitating a congenial environment that will allow them to adjust to American conditions. But the forms of cooperation that they worked towards were possible due to the common experiences of prejudice and discrimination faced by both old and new Mexican immigrants (ibid). In this case, cooperation was possible because of a fundamental similarity between the new and the old. I am, however, talking about everyday forms of cooperation, not only those between similar groups/individuals but also those between groups/individuals who are different and are locked into a contradictory yet interdependent relationship.

James C Scott, the noted political scientist, who is well known for his work on subsistence farmers and rural communities in south-east Asia, in two of his most important books (*The Moral Economy of the Peasant* and *Weapons of the Weak*) traces the withering away of the moral economy of the community whereby the community was responsible to some extent for taking care of the basic needs of the people before the structure of production underwent changes. Scott also argues that weak and marginalised people rarely seek to bring about a revolution because they are confronted with the basic problem of ensuring subsistence for themselves. According to Scott, any decisive act aimed at organising a revolt and rebellion can be possible either in a state of absolute hopelessness or in a state of emerging hope of the possibility of changing the conditions that have hitherto severely limited the people's life chances and livelihoods. The poor farmers have mostly been content with the everyday forms of expressing discontent and disagreement, such as going slow, mumbling, and dragging their feet, rather than taking any decisive political step to organise their fellows to fight the problems that affect them (Scott 1976, 1990).

In Subhanpura village, many such everyday forms of resistance are found. Delay in starting agricultural operations and irrigation, backbiting, stealthily carrying away the produce, inadequate care of the produce, disagreement over the share of the produce and crop residues are different everyday forms of resistance. There is, however, a strategic element involved in adopting everyday forms of resistance, as this also leaves space for engaging in everyday forms of cooperation. The villagers usually do not want to settle the issue of contention once and for all. It is only in certain extraordinary scenarios

that everyday forms of resistance degenerate into full-blown conflict, thereby leading people to depend almost completely on horizontal relationships and networks, or to side with other classes across the line of cleavage. Beck (1994) finds that the rich and the poor are mutually bound in many ways. The poor are bound because they need to obtain resources such as common property resources (CPRs), credit, and livestock, as much as they need or desire social recognition from the rich. The rich are bound because they seek to enjoy a good reputation and to get compliant labour through the adoption of a cooperative demeanour. This mutual relationship of cooperation is also backed by a series of symbolic and sumptuary practices that confirm and underscore the need for such forms of cooperation.

Earning a living is as much a matter of economics as politics, because one has to take many decisions that have political and strategic significance. This includes what one would like to earn from and what kinds of associations one would like to make while earning a living. This is the politics of livelihood and, in an extended sense, also of living. It also means deciding the extent to which one wants to get involved in any conflict, and how one can use these conflicts to cajole, coerce, or intimidate people to cooperate. The poor also have to make these choices. The very poor do not get much space or freedom to make such choices because they are overburdened by the pressure of earning a subsistence living and do not have the time to worry about such matters. But as their incomes rise and their well-being at the household level improves, they, too, face these questions and take appropriate decisions after rationally weighing the pros and cons of the situation. While choosing their options, the poor are clear about their social position vis-à-vis other classes. They are aware that they share common features with certain kinds of poor people, such as the landless poor, marginal farmers, the infirm poor, the scheduled caste (sc) poor, and the sharecropping poor.

However, this social positioning is a matter of “class-in-itself” (in terms of their objective location) and not “class-for-itself”, because the poor usually lack any subjective consciousness of belonging to a class. A “class-for-itself” consciousness is usually a difficult thing for them to achieve. In any case, class consciousness helps them only to a limited extent in earning their daily living. Overly emphasising the importance of class would mean discounting the possibilities of inter-class cooperation. There are not only everyday forms of expressing dissent and dissatisfaction in the village, but are also everyday forms of developing relationships and bonds. The poor even use idleness as a resource for developing the relationships, networks, and compacts that are essential for their livelihood and survival (Kumar 2010). Some of them prefer sitting idle and working on developing relationships that support their livelihoods rather than on furthering the cause of the class to which they belong, but which can help them only to a limited extent in their everyday life. However, the opportunities that are made available through such contacts do not change their relative position with their patrons, but help them in absolute terms (ibid). By engendering different forms of cooperation and by restricting conflict, CDL facilitates the meeting of the

living requirements (housing, clothing, food, medicines, etc) of the poor and the marginalised. Nevertheless, CDL inhibits the further growth and restructuring of productive forces. It is status-quoist and oriented towards the pragmatic considerations of life. Insofar as it is a conservative force and prohibits progressive change in society, it both facilitates and constricts at the same time. In an illuminating paper, Singh and Tripathi (2010) describe how bonded labourers fear freedom. They write:

The bonded labourers assess the challenges and risks involved in the gains of freedom which were likely to accrue to them in future against the losses accruing to them in the existing bondage situations, linked as it was with a typical protection and survival support from the employer (Singh and Tripathi 2010: 292).

The dependence of bonded labourers on their employers leads to the development of a belief system that makes their relationship more acceptable and less painful for the bonded labourers. The security and predictability of cooperation, although occurring within a subservient socio-economic relationship (“everyday form of compliance”, in Kerkvliet’s words), is seen as a safety net by the bonded labourers in handling the vicissitudes of an unpredictable life. There is enough historical evidence of the difficulties experienced by free labour when it was released from feudal relationships during the transition to capitalism. Rising numbers of free labour led to floating populations and to increased vagrancy in the early phase of capitalism. Their newfound freedom brought in its trail a lot of miseries for them, because their former employers were also freed from their moral obligation of ensuring the subsistence of their former dependents.

The complexity of the lives of the poor, as discussed in this section, cannot be covered in formalistic and classificatory studies on poverty. Social anthropology can perhaps bail poverty studies out of this difficulty.

Social Anthropology in the Service of Poverty Studies

Poverty studies need an anthropological turn, one that would help focus on everydayness and bring to the fore the complexity and multidimensionality of poverty. The aim of this anthropological turn would not be to undermine the validity or usefulness of the statistics on poverty, but rather to make them more meaningful. Such studies would also help us interpret the findings based on analysed quantitative data gathered from large-scale surveys far more effectively. They would also introduce newer dimensions pertaining to data collection and analyses. We need to discuss anthropological approaches, methods, and techniques (which can be used in different combinations) that can make this anthropological turn possible. Researchers working in other disciplines can also use these methods/techniques to focus on everydayness while studying poverty.

Ethnography is an important method for gaining and developing a descriptive and analytical view of society. It focuses primarily on intensive and first-hand fieldwork in those communities it seeks to observe and understand. Modern ethnography largely revolves around the technique of participant

observation and the fieldwork is usually a long-standing one. In addition, other research techniques, such as interviews, questionnaires, and video and audio documentation, are also used. Ethnography aims to provide an insider's view, which is to know the way in which natives see themselves as living in their own society. Ethnography, due to its distinguishing approach makes social/cultural anthropology a specialised discipline in social science.

Truths: Partial and Authorial

Ethnographic fieldwork in anthropology began mainly with Bronislaw K Malinowski's fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands, located off the eastern coast of New Guinea. Margaret Mead's (1928) work in Samoa is also part of the initial pioneering studies in the discipline. Before Malinowski, works in anthropology were neither systematic nor recorded personally by the researcher. They were mostly based on informants' accounts. As a result of the outbreak of the first world war, Malinowski, an Austrian national and hence on the losing side of the war, lived in the Trobriand Islands. He would otherwise have been interned in Europe. He transformed this circumstance into a great opportunity and did prodigious fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands. He learned the language of the islanders, recorded their activities in great detail, and engaged in empathic field observation. He recorded data on both the social organisation and culture of the islanders and gave a detailed description of what he called the "impoderabilia of actual life", that is, details of ordinary life. He believed that the goals of ethnographic fieldwork were describing social organisation and the details of daily life, as well as collecting ethnographic statements, characteristic narratives, typical utterances, folklore, and magical formulae, with all of these aimed at achieving an understanding of the natives' point of view and their relation to life (Malinowski 1922). He attributed great importance to the collection of natives' concepts, systems of classification, and narratives.

In contrast to Malinowski's position, A R Radcliffe-Brown, another founding father of social anthropology, did not give much importance to narratives and to the views of insiders, as he was motivated by the desire to establish the discipline as a natural science. His writings were more formal and abstract, and were focused on describing the principles of the operation of society. Radcliffe-Brown believed in the methodology of the natural sciences and the possibility of sociological laws. However, another noted anthropologist, E E Evans-Pritchard, believed that anthropology should look only for regularities and not for laws. He argued that anthropology should look for patterns rather than laws because social systems are not natural, but rather are moral and symbolic systems, and hence the aim of anthropology should be to interpret social reality rather than to explain it (Evans-Pritchard 1951; Mair 1988). However, the latter trend has become more common with the increased prominence of cultural anthropology, where the focus is on finding and analysing the underlying meaning of symbols and metaphors as part of culture. In the cultural and humanistic sciences, there was increasing realisation that all studies

arrive only at partial truths. Clifford and Marcus (1986) in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* support this view. The influence of Foucault, Lyotard, and Derrida on anthropological writings was obvious, and an ethnographic narrative by a researcher was seen as a particular reading of the field and not the ultimate truth.

Cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete. And, worse than that, the more deeply it goes the less complete it is. It is a strange science whose most telling assertions are its most tremulously based, in which to get somewhere with the matter at hand is to intensify the suspicion, both your own and that of others, that you are not quite getting it right. But that, along with plaguing subtle people with obtuse questions, is what being an ethnographer is like (Geertz 1973: 29).

In writing ethnography, the authority of the ethnographer to communicate a truth has also been undermined over the years, because it is now seen as the outcome of a collaborative exercise between the ethnographer and informants and interpreters (Clifford 1986, 2006). With the gradual disillusionment with the natural science methodology in the social and cultural sciences over the years, anthropology has moved ahead of Radcliffe-Brownian prescriptions for the discipline, notwithstanding the occasional doubts expressed in some quarters about the scientific character of the method and the outputs delivered through it. Clifford Geertz is the most representative example of such a scholar. He has been interested in interpretation that is, in uncovering the different layers of the meaning surrounding any act or event, and not in scientific explanation as it is usually understood in positivistic approaches. The interpretation would happen only through the thick description, a concept borrowed from Gilbert Ryle. Geertz refers to the distinction made by Gilbert Ryle between a twitch of an eye, a wink, and a caricature of a wink. The distinction between the three can be made only by understanding the context and by providing a good description of the happenings around the act and understanding layers of meanings embedded in them. Since Geertz, the interaction between field and fieldworker is now considered more dynamic and subjective than ever before, and the resultant ethnography is an outcome of this interaction rather than being an objective or a final account. In his foreword to *The Remembered Village* by M N Srinivas, Sol Tax writes:

Ethnography is an art in so far as it is a purposeful attempt to describe for outsiders how a society of necessarily heterogeneous persons see one another and their ideas and their behaviour collectively... The least likely ideal one imagines is the vacuum of a false 'objectivity' which is in fact polluted with all of the intrusions of the unconscious. A good ethnography must necessarily be a high art (Tax 1976: viii).

At an operational level, the anthropological method is now focused on observing people's conduct in their daily life and in their daily business in their natural setting. The insider perspective remains crucial in making anthropology a humane science. After his/her entry into the field, the researcher affects the natural environment to some extent, but gradually the situation becomes normal if he conducts himself impartially and honourably. The focus is on conducting unobtrusive observation. The challenge before the researcher is to locate

himself between two extreme ends – first, of complete immersion in the natives' culture, and, second, of non-participation in the field. This tension has been examined by Whyte (1955) in his classic study, *Street Corner Society: The Social Structure of an Italian Slum*. The strength of the ethnographic method lies in its informality; it does not mainly rely on formally structured interviews of inhabitants in the field. This enables the researcher to get back repeatedly to the same people who help him understand the same event or issue many times. This provides an opportunity for conducting a veracity check as well, as the same things are told to the researcher on different occasions both by the same and by different people. Informal discussion is part of the method and should be carried out with the purpose of finding answers to the research question. Whyte (1955) said that he did little formal interviewing while conducting his fieldwork in a street-corner society. Indeed, Whyte was counselled by one of his key informants to go easy on questions such as how, what, why, and where, because these questions make people uncomfortable and suspicious. In any case, these questions are likely to be answered through extended interaction while the researcher is in the field and once a certain level of trust has been established between the ethnographer and the respondents. With regard to poverty studies, ethnography can be used to gain a real picture of the lives of the poor and of changes in their economic and social status, and also to gain an understanding of the rationality underlying their behaviour, which is otherwise often considered irrational.

Once the researcher has spent a sufficiently long time with a group of the poor, he sees small changes taking place. He locates these changes as taking place over a longer span of time, as conversations with people enable him to determine whether the changes that he sees are part of long-term changes, which he figures out by talking to people, or whether these changes are an aberration. Whyte calls this kind of fieldwork a moving film. He writes (1955: 323):

I now came to realise that time itself was one of the key elements in my study. I was observing, describing, and analysing groups as they evolved and changed through time. It seemed to me that I could explain much more effectively the behaviour of men when I observed them over time than would have been the case if I had got them at one point in time. In other words, I was taking a moving picture instead of a still photograph.

In the Indian context, almost all village studies that are based on ethnographic fieldwork studies have reported on sociocultural change. Some of the major studies are by M N Srinivas (1976), Bétéille (1971) and Wisner (1936). Epstein's (1962) book on social change in two villages in the Mysore region of Karnataka is based on ethnographic fieldwork in Wangala and Dalena. S C Dube (1959) discusses using oral tradition and the memories of people insofar as these do not glorify certain families and individuals in the village in an attempt to understand change along with the use of other documentary evidence. Anand Chakravarti (1975) raises the issue of reconstructing the past based on the statements of individuals, which in turn are based on the memory of these informants. Chakravarti

cross-checked many of these statements and assessed their effects during his stay in the village (ibid). Shah (1979) describes his experience of gathering revenue data about family, caste, religion, economy, administration, landownership, and tenure. He also refers to having used information from genealogists, but admits that the information about the past was collected in bits and pieces, and hence needed to be woven together. He found that an understanding of the past helped in an understanding of the present, and vice versa.

The nature and scope of historical analysis as part of anthropological fieldwork depends on the nature and scope of the larger study. At this stage, however, I can say with some certainty that ethnographic accounts can yield good insights about the nature of change and its effects as these are experienced by the poor.

Use of Narratives

Narratives are an essential part of ethnography while ethnography itself is a type of narrative. The importance of narratives has increased in the social sciences since the 1960s, as interpretive approaches to the study of society have become more widespread. Narratives can be put to two broad uses. In the first scenario, the researcher is not interested in inferring social reality from narratives. The researcher is interested only in the subjectivity of the narrator. The aim is to know how the social structure and other forces are perceived to be affecting the narrator. In such cases, the story of the narrator cannot be assumed to be truthful. The researcher is also not interested in exploring the truth value of such narratives, although he or she does create a suitable environment that will enable the narrator to give a real account. But a narrative is a selective representation of reality and emerges from a dialogic (in the sense of M Bakhtin's idea) interaction between the researcher and the subject.

In the second scenario, researchers also use narratives to make inferences about the actual social reality. This is a common practice in ethnography, and informal interviews are conducted for such studies. In this scenario, the researcher needs to assess these narratives for their truth value. These narratives are usually checked on different occasions with the same respondent as well as with other respondents (Moen 2006). Triangulation is a normal practice in writing ethnography. But verifying narratives based on the narratives of other respondents is sometimes difficult because it is not easy to find the right people for the task. In studies that explore the narratives of respondents at a deeper level, it is crucial that the researcher should have built a necessary level of trust and understanding, and should not allow respondents any opportunity to mislead the researcher. That is why interpretive approaches are now said not to have discovered or recovered narratives, but rather to have developed them along with respondents and interpreters (Clifford and Marcus 1986).

Even in the case of formal interviews that have closed-ended options, the respondents on many occasions respond to different questions based on an underlying and sometimes unconscious or unstated idea that they bear in mind. It is only

in disciplines and methodologies where the experiment is the basis of the production of knowledge that one can dispense with narratives. Even in the case of supposedly positivist approaches, there are instances of the narratives of people being packed into findings that are claimed to be objective. A substantial part of statistics pertaining to income and consumption expenditure is an aggregation based on the narratives of individual respondents that scholars have no way but to take as a given. What one needs is not to dispense with narratives, but rather to exercise caution in using them appropriately. In the latter scenario, a complete reliance on narratives on the part of the researcher without any understanding of the social structure would make his/her findings less close to the reality.

For studying poverty, narratives are extremely important in both the ways, that is, as a way to understand the life-worlds (in the Habermasian sense, the life-world is a realm of meanings and practices marking a group, ranging from families to communities) of the deprived, as well as to create pictures of the actual reality. Narratives have also been used for creating life histories and life stories. Historians have used oral history, which does not focus so much on historical events but rather on how these events have affected those who lived in those circumstances. The Chicago School of sociologists focused on life history. Thomas and Znaniecki's *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America: Monograph of an Immigrant Group* (1918) was the first significant study that used the life-history method. The method later fell out of fashion for some time before Oscar Lewis used it for his study of poverty (Chase 2005).

Use of Case Studies

Case studies of households, families, and individuals could be very useful for poverty studies in India. They are currently being used more in application-oriented studies on poverty. There is a considerable body of literature on the use of different kinds of case studies in the social sciences. There have been case studies of countries, districts, villages, wards, individuals, households, etc. The most important question about the selection and use of case studies pertains to their representativeness or otherwise. This concern is usually motivated by a desire to transform the social sciences into an objective science.

While discussing village-level studies (vls) on different facets of poverty in India, Barbara Harriss (1992) talks about two kinds of village studies. She says that vls have been used to test specific theories; she cites the Palanpur study done by Bliss and Stern in 1982. This study focused on agriculture in an Indian village from the standpoint of theories of economic development. Harriss describes the second kind of vls that are inductive and exploratory, and are not influenced by any explicitly acknowledged theories. An example of this, although in the American context, is Liebow's (1967) study of the Negro street corner. The writing of case studies is usually done to verify or falsify some theory. The aim is either to validate it by using a case representing one class of phenomena or to disprove the theory. In the latter scenario, a new theory would be needed to explain the reality better. Many scholars in the

cultural and humanistic sciences do not always regard cases as apt illustrations of some principles of operation of social structures. F G Bailey (1960) says in this regard:

A low level of generalisation is less exact, less elegant, and infinitely more untidy and incomplete than high abstraction. Its advantage is that it can present data from which generalisations are made and it allows the reader some kind of check on these abstractions, not by the test of internal consistency only, but also by relating the analysis to what goes on. It is particularly necessary to make use of case material in studying social change, because our theoretical apparatus for the study of change scarcely exists. The beginnings must be empirical (ibid 1960: 15).

Glaser and Strauss (1967) seek the development of a grounded theory based on empirical evidence. Liebow (1967) says that he did not collect data to test a hypothesis or a theory. He tried making sense of the data after it had been collected, and hence the study was truly exploratory in scope. Such studies are quite common in social anthropology wherein cases are purposively selected to understand the complexity of the processes at work and the insights they impart, and not to test any existing theory or to arrive at a new one. They focus on finding answers to any empirical research question which drives the research and the researcher.

Some anthropologists consider fieldwork in general as an extended case that is constituted of multiple smaller cases. These smaller cases offer new insights and understanding, and help anthropologists construct the larger picture. For Gluckman, the extended case is usually centred on connected cases in some area of social life (Gluckman 1961). He argues that the use of the extended case method reflects the structural issues of the local society because the activities of the same groups or individuals are traced across different incidents. The use of the extended case method can reveal the main problem of the research study. One example of this is the discussion by Anand Chakravarti (1975) of the relationship between

Survey

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Experimental Economics: A Survey

by

*Sujoy Chakravarty, Daniel Friedman, Gautam Gupta, Neeraj Hatekar,
Santanu Mitra, Shyam Sunder*

Over the past few decades, experimental methods have given economists access to new sources of data and enlarged the set of economic propositions that can be validated. This field has grown exponentially in the past few decades, but is still relatively new to the average Indian academic. The objective of this survey is to familiarise the Indian audience with some aspects of experimental economics. The survey attempts to bring to the interested reader a flavour of this field. The survey is presented in five separate articles after this introduction. The notes and references for all articles are at the end of the survey.

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Sher Singh and Bhim Singh in Devisar village in Rajasthan, which describes the transition from traditional to rational legal authority in the village. An ethnographer, however, does not report all the small cases that he sees in a written work, but selects only those that are pertinent to the interpretation that he makes. Many small cases are considered only incidental when it comes to answering the main research question. The ethnographer makes a selection not only in writing the case studies of individuals, but also in describing the daily mundane and pedestrian facts and incidents of life. Hence, a report based on ethnographic fieldwork is a particular reading of the field. In the past, anthropologists such as Max Gluckman, F G Bailey, and Anand Chakravarti used cases as a method of exposition in social anthropology. Case studies are useful not only for conducting in-depth research, but also for planning large-scale sample studies and for explaining analysed data with reference to the real world. Unless some exploratory case studies have been done at the beginning of a research study, the questionnaire/schedule cannot be sufficiently broadened to exhaust all possible questions that might need to be asked. The case study is useful because it provides an in-depth understanding of a case that can be explored through different techniques. This, on many occasions, becomes a transformative experience for the researcher as well.

The use of case studies presents certain problems, and these are sought to be corrected in an objectivist tradition of exploring knowledge. One problem pertains to the reliability of the findings based on the case study method. This is, to some extent, addressed through the adoption of a common theoretical framework. Another problem with regard to the case study method is the difficulty in predicting or determining the extent to which explorations should continue for the case study (Goode and Hatt 1981). Case studies are illuminating about the cases being studied, but offer no justification for not undertaking a larger structural analysis and use of other techniques. Both are needed because they can enrich one another in studies on poverty.

Family Studies

The use of family studies for understanding the complexity of poverty and how it affects the individual members of the family was pioneered mainly by Oscar Lewis. Lewis used different methods for undertaking family studies. In *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty, Etc* (1962), he provided a window into the daily lives of five Mexican families on five ordinary days. In *The Children of Sanchez: Autobiography of a Mexican Family* (1961), he asked each member of the household to tell his or her own story. Lewis wanted readers to understand the issues and concerns of people who grow up and live in a single-room slum-dwelling. Incorporating details from the autobiographies of different members of the family helped him reduce the investigator's bias (Lewis 1967). Lewis considered the family an important location of interaction between cultural and individual factors, and he felt that family studies could help explore the networks within which families spend most of their lives (Lewis 1966, 1967).

In *Pedro Martinez*, Lewis narrates a tape-recorded story of a Mexican peasant family as told by three of its members. He wanted to communicate to readers the feeling and thinking of peasants in a period of rapid sociocultural change (Lewis 1980). In *La Vida*, a study of a hundred Puerto Rican families from the slums of Greater San Juan and New York city, Lewis focused on urban slum life and adaptation in the family life of migrants to New York city. In the same study, 16 members of a family in Greater San Juan and New York city tell their life stories and those of their parents and grandparents (Lewis 1966). In this book, Lewis used a combination of multiple biographies and observed representative days, that is, any usual day. Lewis (1967) says that the focus on biographies brought into the picture the subjective views of the people concerned, while descriptions of their daily lives provided insights into the complexity of their existence. He notes that the family case study is not a new phenomenon and has been used by social workers, sociologists, psychologists, and others, but has mostly focused on families in trouble, depression, problem children, divorce, etc (ibid). Lewis gave a new direction to family studies because his work was descriptive and holistic as opposed to quantitative studies, which mostly focused on certain variables. Of late, studies have focused on livelihoods of the households as a unit of production and consumption. But these studies are mostly limited to the field of development practice. Lewis used different techniques in his family studies. He was mainly interested in finding those traits in the family that he had identified while validating his theory of the culture of poverty. Limiting our studies to the culture of poverty framework could be avoided, but the holism of the family/household could be retained for analysis because it is in the context of the family/household that personality, culture, and social structure interact in complex and as yet unexplored ways to determine the behaviour of the poor.

Difficulties and the Rewards of Overcoming These Problems

There are two kinds of difficulties in following this route. One is methodological, and the other is political. The methodological difficulty is that while becoming deeply involved in the study of everyday life, it becomes difficult to extricate one's self from the phenomenological domains of the subjects and to reflect on the social structure. Highly skilled and competent researchers are required to handle such assignments, so that they are able to reflect on both the life-worlds and the social structure simultaneously.

The other major difficulty is a political one. The focus on the everyday life of the poor, and its description, has led to huge debates in the social sciences with regard to the negative stereotyping of the poor and its effect on social policy in the US (Bourgeois 2003). This happened mainly with regard to the writings of Oscar Lewis, but also with a few others. Lewis, who undertook ethnographic field studies of lower-class households in Mexico, Puerto Rico, and the US, put forward the concept of the culture of poverty. The concept was defined as a design of life for the poor. It emerges in response to situational

factors but becomes autonomous over a period of time. It plays an important role in organising the everyday lives of the poor. The concept became the centre of a serious debate because Lewis provided intimate details of some households of the poor based on his ethnographic studies. His writing was also criticised for giving credence to blame-the-poor explanations of poverty (Bourgois 2001). Bourgois (2003) and Wilson (1996) point out that blame-the-poor explanation bolstered conservative arguments for reducing welfare support to the poor in the us. Conservatives usually criticise a section of the poor as undeserving and as lacking individual self-worth, and hence argue that welfare support should not be extended to these people. This stance discouraged in-depth studies of the poor in the 1970s and 1980s in the us. Similarly, in the Indian context as well, studies that can focus on the detailed and inner lives of the poor can be used as an alibi for not making available adequate welfare support to the deprived sections of society as they can be accused of not being capable/responsible enough to use this support effectively. This is more likely in the new economy where welfare support could be seen as increasing the financial burden of the state and hence as wasteful. The opposition to the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) in India is a case in point. An Indian counterpart of blame-the-poor explanation can be the argument that tribal communities are responsible for their own lack of development as well as for acting as serious obstacles to the process of liberalisation, globalisation and ensuing growth and prosperity.

Despite these risks, Bourgois considers it important to focus on everyday life. He argues that negative representations of the poor should not come at the cost of sanitising the pain and suffering experienced by the poor (Bourgois 2003).

Anthropological approaches can help poverty studies in India in producing detailed, in-depth accounts of the poor and of poverty. Ethnography offers great possibilities for future research in the field. The focus on quotidianity can make poverty studies richer and bring them closer to the complex reality of everyday life. It would be interesting to look for terms of association/exchange across classes in any existing community on a daily basis. This will also reveal the nature of politics in such scenarios, because power is not enjoyed by the superordinates unequivocally and in equal measure, independent of time and of the sites of operation. Another important aspect in this regard is the exploration of conditions that lead to the abandonment of local conventions and practices, and to the emergence of all-out conflict. The focus on quotidianity is important for making the effect of structural factors more intelligible. That is why Bourgois (2003) describes his study on East Harlem as a recounting of the “individual experience of social structural oppression”. The study of everyday lives and the analysis of social structures are not mutually exclusive processes. They go hand in hand and enrich one another in the attempt to understand poverty. These studies and analyses would make poverty a sufficiently human problem leading to moral indignation that demands the resolution of the grossest forms of inequality and deprivation. The political resolve to address the problem of poverty will not come about as much from making numerical or statistical representations as from making the agonies of the poor people visible. This can possibly dislodge our “social deafness and moral blindness”, which Nandy (2004) holds as being primarily responsible for the normal functioning of our democratic polity without bothering much about the need to tackle poverty and destitution.

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