

**GETTING OFF THE YELLOW
BRICK ROAD:
MEASUREMENT AND DEFINITIONAL
ISSUES IN POVERTY**

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INTRODUCTION

In the opening chapter of his brilliant book *Weapons of the Weak*, James C. Scott gave a graphic description of a peasant in Kampong Sedaka in the Muda region of Kedah:

Razak is the 'down-and-out' (*papa kedana*) of the village, and his house was not only an embarrassment to him; it was a collective humiliation for much of Sedaka. When I had arrived in the village, Razak and his family were living *under* the house, not in it. Two walls of attap and bamboo had fallen away and much of the roof had collapsed. 'They live like chickens in a henhouse, a lean-to, not like Malays,' villagers said with derision.... 'They don't eat at all well,' said Tok Kasim's wife, 'they have to tag along at other people's feasts'. For breakfast, if there was any money in the house, coffee and perhaps cassava or a bit of cold rice left over from the day before. Otherwise, only water. The midday meal, the main one in the village, for Razak's family would typically include rice, vegetables that could be gathered free in the village, and, if finances permitted, some dried fish or the cheapest fish from the market.Razak's household, like its food, was distinguished less by what it had than by what it lacked. The couple had no mosquito netting, which helped explain why their children's arms and legs were often covered with the scabs of louse bites. Maybe once a year they bought a bar of the cheapest soap. They had to share three tin plates and two cups when they ate. They lacked even the traditional mats to sleep on, using instead an old cast-off plastic sheet Razak found at the market. As for clothes, Azizah had not bought a sarong since her wedding, making do instead with worn-out cloth given her by Basir's wife. Razak's one pair of pants and shirt were bought three years ago when there was a sale of secondhand clothing that had not been redeemed at the pawnbrokers.¹

A not unfamiliar tale of poverty. Razak was extremely poor by any measure. There are thousands of Razaks in Malaysia. They exist not only in the rural countryside but also in urban areas.

Class societies by their very definition breed and perpetuate poverty. Attempts to address poverty issues are of recent origins. More specifically in the developing world they began only after World War II. These initiatives were born in the industrial West and were exported by foreign advisers and consultants to poverty-afflicted nations. These jet-set experts often come for a short period and operated from posh hotels dictating the ground rules for eradicating poverty. There is definitely big business in poverty policy programmes.

Academics, too, have cashed in on the poverty issue. Many jumped on to the poverty bandwagon. They have investigated the causes of poverty, ways to eradicate poverty, profiles of the poor, indicators of poverty, and of late even to the extent

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of developing a poverty monitoring system.² Vast amount of money is poured into these noble causes. Their findings are deliberated in seminars and conferences both at the national and international levels. But persistent poverty defies their captive minds. Theoretical, definitional, and measurement issues continue to haunt poverty studies. Exorcising poverty is ritualized. Among the producing classes the Razaks are born and live out their daily existence producing and reproducing their like images. Class-ridden societies multiply these soldiers of broken fortunes.

THE MAINSTREET

The poverty issue is addressed by sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, economists, and even those in the medical sciences. Theoretical, definitional, and measurement debates among researchers are frequent. A reader glancing casually at the numerous writings on poverty will be struck by the existence of a plethora of definitions and measurements regarding the subject. Quite often writings on the field contain apologetic statements. Poverty, for instance, has been described as an elusive term.³ Others contend that the subject is amorphous.⁴ Some, not wanting to be left out of the semantic *ju jit-su*, prefer to address the term poverty as being evocative and provocative.⁵

These researchers provided various definitions of poverty. The two most commonly employed approaches are absolute poverty and relative poverty. The former 'seeks to describe poverty as the lack of income needed to acquire minimum necessities of life.'⁶ In addition, 'the amount of money required to acquire these essential goods and services for living has always been taken as a demarcating line that separates the poor from the non-poor.'⁷ The latter concept deals with inequality. 'A person is said to be poor when his or her income is significantly less than the average income of the population.'⁸ Both these approaches are incorporated in the Fifth Malaysia Plan:

In Malaysia, the number of poor households and the incidence of poverty have been measured on the basis of a poverty line income. Poverty has been defined and measured on the basis of the prevailing standard of living in the country which is in accordance with Malaysian conditions and cannot really be compared with other countries. Poverty has been conceptualized in terms of the ability of an average Malaysian household to consume sufficient goods and services. The poverty line income is defined as an income sufficient to purchase a minimum food basket to maintain a household in good nutritional health and the conventional needs in respect of clothing and footwear, rent, fuel and power, transport and communications, health, education, and recreation. It includes more than just food. It is, therefore defined relative to the standard of living prevailing in Malaysia which is well above the prevailing in some other countries.⁹

Researchers are left to hone in and refine within the parameters of these given assumptions.

Measurement and definitional issues in poverty cannot be treated in isolation without addressing the various theoretical approaches employed to understand and explain the phenomenon. Most of the existing mainstream conceptual approaches, however, can be grouped under the modernist-culturalist school. The proponents of this school explain the existence of poverty through values and attitudes of individuals. The profound statement in the Fifth Malaysia Plan clearly drives home

this point:

Attitudes as well as cultural and social factors also have an influence on the livelihood of the individuals. Where the motivation towards hard work is weak, where social and cultural factors inhibit the adoption of modern practices, for example, the underutilization of land to its full potentials, and where the motivation to change and respond to new opportunities is lacking, there will be less progress and households with these values and attitudes will continue to remain backward. There are, therefore, limits to what the Government can do to uplift the socio-economic conditions of the low-income groups. The major factors associated with poverty clearly indicate the necessity for both the Government and individual to jointly overcome the many barriers towards economic progress.¹⁰

The panacea of poverty, therefore, lies with the individual. Those who are injected with modern values and attitudes will be immunised. These views are pervasive. Even economists who explain the existence of poverty along the lines of marginal productivity subscribe to these assumptions. Low agricultural productivity is commonly attributed by them to the uneconomic-sized holdings, lack of modern technologies and inputs, and the dearth of capital for commercialized farming. It is only when peasants change their values and attitudes that productivity will increase and poverty will wither.

Poverty is often reduced into neat figures and percentages displayed in tables or as numbers in statistical equations. The debate continues on the correct poverty income line, the constituents of basic necessities, and the number of calories needed by an adult for a decent living. Such data drawn from surveys do not comprehend the realities of on-going processes. Razak does not understand statistical manipulations nor is he aware of the term calories. He is a soldier who fights a daily battle to survive. Current assumptions are value-loaded and need rethinking. Syed Husin Ali, in 1986, expressed 'Whether we like it or not the problem of poverty needs to be viewed with a more radical perspective.'¹¹

THE GROUND SWELL

Conventional conceptual premises of poverty are increasingly challenged by recent research results. These scholarly works grounded in the various disciplines of the social sciences have seriously undermined some of the basic foundations of poverty studies. Their sole intention is to understand the processes involved in the expansion of market and production forces and its consequent social change. In classical scholarly traditions they have documented these processes through extensive research over long periods of time in the field. The broader modernization-culturalist school with its universal assumptions have been questioned by a more thorough application that concentrates on the dynamics of specific conditions within the historical context of the global expansion of capitalism. The changing material bases is the running theme in all their research. The new research agenda focuses on the human experience undergoing unfolding social change.

The demystified definition of poverty takes into consideration its class origins and changing material bases. The peasant smallholder does not profit from the fruits of his labour. He merely sells his produce in the market for family income. The tenant farmer sells the produce and pays land rent. The agrarian worker is compelled to sell his labour power to avoid starvation. These factions of the producing classes

rarely accumulate wealth for expanded reproduction. They will always remain poor in relation to other extractive classes.

This paper highlights three of the more recent research that will collectively locate the problems of poverty in a new dimension.

SOWING THE SEEDS OF MASS POVERTY

Theoretically informed writings in history have gained considerable prominence in the recent past to explain and understand contemporary social phenomena including poverty. Shaharil Talib's *Global History at the Local Level: Batu Pahat 1900-1941*, is one such work.¹² The study departed from conventional historical research to address the history of the common people, the Malay peasantry in the coastal region of Johor. It provides the much needed insight into the local level societal processes reacting towards the global onslaught of market forces.

In the first four decades of the twentieth century the district of Batu Pahat witnessed rapid development. The prime mover of the process was not the plantation interests but the thousands of Malay peasant smallholders who persevered to tame the coastal lands for agricultural cultivation. They came from the larger Malay world and included the Javanese, Bugis, and Banjarese. Global market forces and the Colonial State shaped new social order based on private property, accumulation of capital, and commodity production. A new social edifice was built on the shoulder of the Malay peasantry.

In class-ridden societies the basic producer generates the surpluses that other superordinate classes appropriate through interests, rents, profits, surplus labour and taxes. The life-blood of relatively autonomous petty commodity producers is to extend their fundamental material and physical concern and to reproduce themselves. The central activity of subordinate classes is their basic primary needs - food, shelter and clothing. The social relations of production and exchange and relations with the state defined the parameters of their production and reproduction.

The beginning of the twentieth century saw the coming of rubber. The response by the peasantry was phenomenal. The new crop drastically altered the agricultural landscape of the coastal region. It outstripped the traditional export crops of coconut, arecanut, gambier and pepper. The smallholders laboured for the global need for rubber. The earlier production for use-value withered to that of exchange. At the production level smallholders disposed their rubber to middlemen. Most were Chinese. Thousands of smallholders were dependent on rubber for their livelihood. Global market slumps burdened the material existence of the peasantry. Many were further impoverished. The peasants were victims of global market prices, exploitative local market mechanisms, and the appropriating Colonial State. The peasantry's existence as a class was threatened.

More importantly, the changing relations of production and exchange brought about by the expanding global economy saw the emergence of another class in the countryside. These non-producing classes settled in small towns and villages. They extracted profits through various forms from the toiling peasant masses. It was through these Chinese middlemen, traders, wholesalers, retailers, merchants, and money-lenders that peasant produce made its way to the market. Profits were extracted at every stage. Capitalist penetration sowed the seeds of mass poverty. The

producing classes were encapsulated into the global market economy at the local level. They toiled for a living while others accumulated wealth on their life. The history of the peasantry is essentially that of production and reproduction of their material existence on a daily basis. The maximization of profits dominates social relations. Class domination is the underlying theme of material history.

The social order of Batu Pahat was historically built on its material bases. The expansion and contraction of the market economy was experienced by peasant smallholders, tenant farmers and coolies who worked the fields. They were located at the production level of the agricultural industry. Each fraction of the working class produced for exchange value. Their social product were appropriated by officials who were paid from taxes; landlords who lived on rent; merchants who bought cheap and sold dear and money-lenders who squeezed interests. In addition the fortunes of the peasants fluctuated with the rise and fall of commodity prices. The state, in addition, flattened the producing classes further through its revenue demands at production and exchange levels. The tillers of the soil were left eventually to reproduce the conditions of their subservience.

THE DETERIORATING MATERIAL CONDITIONS

The contemporary Malay peasantry in the coastal areas of Johor is the focus of Mohammed Halib's research.¹³ More specifically the study unravels the impact of the Johor Barat Integrated Agricultural Development Project on the poverty-stricken Malay smallholders in the region. Methodologically, the work is an extension of the one pioneered by Shaharil Talib described above.

The deteriorating material conditions of the peasantry became the focus of the post-colonial state in its broader poverty eradication plan. A comprehensive programme for an integrated approach to agricultural development in the region was drawn up. The World Bank was approached for loans to part-finance the establishment of the Johor Barat IADP. Rampant poverty in the districts of Batu Pahat, Muar, and Pontian was further complicated by the presence of the problematic peat soils and frequent floodings caused by the deterioration of a dilapidated drainage system. The major component of the Johor Barat IADP, therefore, centred on the complete rehabilitation of the drainage system and the establishment of infrastructures such as coastal embankments, dams, and a network of farm roads. Apart from such projects, the programme which was officially implemented in 1974, also proceeded with a massive plan at technology transfer to the peasantry. Oil-palm and high-yielding cocoa clones were released for adoption by the peasantry. Furthermore, research for the development of new pineapple varieties was intensified. The multi-million dollar effort at agricultural development and poverty eradication altered the agricultural landscape of the region and a reasonable degree of technological diffusion took place. However, the overall impact of the Johor Barat IADP on the material conditions of the peasant producers is debatable.

A poignant observation made in the study pointed to the inequality in the distribution of wealth. The cultivating peasant class continued to be objects of wealth accumulation by non-cultivating classes. Among the initial few that gained from the Johor Barat IADP, soon after it was launched, were big-businesses consisting of primarily contractors. They secured numerous tenders for infrastructural

development. The few in this non-cultivating class received the lion's share of the benefits. The peasantry was under siege by these non-cultivating profiteers. Land under peasant smallholdings was coveted by them. The implementation of the massive agricultural development project witnessed a marked increase in the changeover of ownership from Malays to non-Malays. In the 11-year period after 1974 a net loss of 1546 acres was experienced by Malay peasants to non-Malay landowners. The trend is continuing.

The call for increased productivity and the application of modern technologies received favourable response from the peasantry. The suppliers of agrochemicals capitalized on the situation. Selling agricultural inputs to the peasantry is a lucrative business. The two-fold increase in the number of retail outlets in the Pontian district, after a decade of project implementation, amply demonstrated the high premium associated with the enterprise. Currently, ten outlets serve the production needs of thousands of peasant families. This fraction of the non-cultivating class extracted their profits from the toiling peasants.

The expanded rural agricultural market brought about by the Johor Barat IADP opened yet another dimension for the non-cultivating classes to accumulate wealth from the peasantry. Despite state intervention in the marketing of peasant produce 79.2 per cent of peasant smallholders were locked into unequal exchange relations with middlemen. The latter had grown in numbers and intensified their exploitative mechanisms to profit from peasants sweat. The recent (1985-1986) downturn of agricultural commodity prices triggered by the global crisis of the capitalist economy dealt a severe blow to the peasants. Many could not sell the fruits of their labour when middlemen temporarily retreated from the commodity market to minimize their losses. The sale of their labour was the only avenue left that kept body and soul together even though wages were mere pittance.

Despite the millions injected in infrastructural building and technology transfer the material conditions of the peasantry declined. Many were still poverty-ridden while a few others in the non-cultivating classes gained substantially. The lesson drawn is rather simple. The continued existence of a class or classes extracting surpluses from the peasant masses will reproduce poverty. It is not so much a question of how to measure poverty but rather how to equitably redistribute wealth and create opportunities.

WAGE LABORER - THE VILLAGE CULTURAL STRANGER

Zahid Emby's study of a village in southern Kedah that had undergone tremendous changes in its economic structures, found that the marginal material gains obtained resulted in 'social' and 'cultural' losses.¹⁴ The village, founded by refugees from the northern part of the state, fleeing the Thai invasion of 1821, had undergone a series of changes in its material bases. It started as a rice farming village producing for home consumption. The villagers cultivated rubber in the early years of this century when market prices shot up. During the Second World War the village rubber smallholdings were forcibly converted to rice fields by the Japanese. Rice cultivation did not meet their basic material life conditions. Under serious economic pressure they sold their rice lands and turned to wage labouring whenever available. After the Second World War these dispossessed peasants continued to sell their labour power

for wages in the agricultural sector. This was the only alternative opened. Working for wages on construction sites, rubber plantations and rice fields, these villagers made ends meet.

In 1981, with the help of the Rubber Industry Smallholders Development Authority (RISDA), the initial village site which had an area of about 32.5 hectares, was planted with oil-palm under RISDA's mini-estate programme. The mini-estate was put under the supervision of a RISDA officer while the workers were drawn from among the villagers, owners as well as non-owners of the estate. A new material base was built for the village with the help of state intervention.

By 1984, half of the 54 heads of households were working as full time or part-time wage labourers in the nearby towns. Wage labour was the dominant form of income for the villagers. The labour market was outside the village. Even among the working unmarried children the majority of them were employed in this sector. These jobs provided them the income for family sustenance. The growth of the construction industry in nearby areas in the 1960's and 1970's created a labour market that was filled by these villagers. In 1984 the wage earner villager provided sufficient food, clothing and shelter for the family. Every household enjoyed electricity and piped water. Almost every household had a radio, more than half had TV sets, one-quarter had electric fans and motorcycles, one-tenth had refrigerators, and even three of the 54 households had motorcars. This socio-economic survey only revealed that the majority of the villagers accumulated consumer items which were bought with wages. However, the real accumulation of wealth was extracted by others from interests, rents, profits and surplus labour.

As long as there was a stable local labour market the villagers' income was assured. Wages provided the basic material necessities and there was enough for consumer goods. However, the new social relations of production took its toll on the social and cultural life of the village. These wage workers left their homes at sunrise and returned before sunset. They were no different from the millions of urban salaried commuters the world over. Yet, they remained resident as villagers, and had to satisfy the demands of village life built on an older material base. The wage earners in this situation faced the demands of the community and culture and his immediate family needs. They found it financially difficult hosting feasts, weddings and performing other cultural decencies expected in an older social order. Furthermore, they did not participate fully in these feasts and social gatherings when others hosted.

Participation in weddings had become a problem for a large number of household heads. When a wedding was held on a weekday, many adult male villagers did not participate fully as they were away at work the whole day. Only their wives helped in the preparations; they only attended the wedding feasts. Ritual feasts presented the wage working villagers with a similar problem. Although held at night, they still did not contribute fully as the preparation of the feast was carried out in the daytime. They graced the feast only, and at times helped clean up after the function; but they could not stay late into the night as they had to leave for work at the crack of dawn. Similarly, communal work had also suffered in terms of attendance and participation. *Gotong royong* which had always played an important part in village life had lost ground. When held on a weekday many did not attend. In the pursuit of material sustenance, close-knitted social relations, cooperation and mutual aid which

were normally associated with Malay village life were slowly eroded. In its place an individualistic lifestyle not very different from that of the urban areas gained dominance. It was a working life that allowed the villager only his sleep in the village. The wage earner was less sensitive to his neighbour's needs. This was not the preferred tradition. But it was something they accepted and lived with as husband, father and breadwinner. The family needs and increasingly became strangers in their own village. As one villager said, describing his new experience:

'Kita ni macam burung. Pagi keluar cari makan, malam balik tidur.' (We are like the birds. We go out in the morning to look for food and we return at night to sleep).

CONCLUSION

Poverty must be understood in the context of processes that create the conditions which produces and reproduces the producing classes. The Malaysian experience in defining and measuring poverty lacks sensitivity to historical material processes. The *papa kedana* in the countryside is a continuous creation, always in the making. The socio-economic survey methodology cannot capture and understand these on-going processes. It merely isolates material items suitable for quantification and measurement. It is from such highly suspect data that definitions, measurements, and theories are built upon. These weaknesses are perpetuated in the next series of questionnaires where earlier conclusions direct the research agenda. For about three decades Malaysia in its developmental drive has pursued the well-trodden path.

The penetration of capital at the turn of the century reconstituted society. There were many who produced for the market and others who denied them the fruits of their labour. This unequal social relations were perpetuated and deepened in more recent times. The massive 'modernization' efforts of the post-colonial period sharpened social cleavages. These on-going processes threatened the material bases of the producing classes. Those who lost their means of livelihood are compelled to sell their labour in an uncertain market. These wage earners are fast losing security of a familiar social and cultural life.

Any effort to define and measure poverty must surely take into serious account historical material processes, class relations, the role of the state, and cultural heritage. The Razaks are historically created and must be understood in that context.

NOTES:

1. James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1985, pp.2-6.

2. Sukor Kasim, 'Poverty Monitoring System', A paper presented at the ISIS First National Conference on Poverty, Kuala Lumpur, January 1986.

3. Government of Malaysia, *Fifth Malaysia Plan 1986-1990*, Kuala Lumpur, National Printing Department, 1986, p.81.

4. Sahak Mamat, 'Poverty in Malaysia - A Note', *Options*, 2/88, Universiti Pertanian Malaysia, 1988, p.5.
5. Zainal Aznam Yusof, 'Concept, Profile and Incidence of Poverty', A paper presented at the ISIS First National Conference on Poverty, Kuala Lumpur, January 1986, p.1.
6. *Fifth Malaysia Plan*, op.cit., p.82.
7. Sahak Mamat, op.cit., p.5.
8. Ibid.
9. *Fifth Malaysia Plan*, op.cit., p.83.
10. Ibid., p.84.
11. Syed Husin Ali, 'Poverty: Social and Political Dimension', A paper presented at the ISIS First National Conference on Poverty, Kuala Lumpur, January 1986, p.39.
12. Shaharil Talib, *Global History At The Local Level: Batu Pahat, 1900-1941*, Institut Pengajian Tinggi, Universiti Malaya, 1985.
13. Mohammed Halib, *Peat, Pits, and pittance: An Integrated Agricultural Development Experience in Peninsular Malaysia*, Hull, Centre for South East Asian Studies, Hull University, 1992.
14. Zahid Emby, *Malay Laborers: Work and the Moral Economy of a Post-Peasant Village*, (Forthcoming).