



SOCIAL EXCLUSION: CONCEPTUALISATION THROUGH THE LENS OF CAPABILITY APPROACH

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Abstract: *The idea of social exclusion is gaining more and more prominence in the academic field world-wide as a fresh way of discussing deprivations. Even though social exclusion overlaps with other concepts such as poverty, they are essentially not the same. Social exclusion is dynamic and multi-dimensional concept refers to the denial of resources, services and opportunities that affect the participation of individuals or groups in a society on equal terms with others. The concept concerns itself with not just the state of being excluded but also the process that leads to it. The process of exclusion may be intentional or unintentional and occurs at multiple levels such as individual, household, community and institutional level. Social exclusion is a violation of human values. It can hamper economic progress and pose security problems of a nation. Just like the definition, there is no general agreement regarding the framework, approach or indicators for measuring social exclusion. The capability approach is a widely celebrated approach for assessing human well-being and welfare. The capability approach, focusing on real freedoms of the people is ideal for examining social exclusion.*

Key Words: Social exclusion, deprivation, capabilities, economic exclusion, political exclusion.

INTRODUCTION

In recent time the term social exclusion is been widely used by academicians, policy makers, intellectuals as well as politicians. Even though the term is relatively new, the idea of exclusion has been there for a very long time. While going through the history of human civilization we can see social exclusion in its various manifestations all over the world. For example take the case of caste system that existed and still continues to exist in various degrees across India, marginalization of people of Roma ethnicity in Europe, discriminations on the basis of race in various parts of the world and marginalization faced by people with disabilities. The characteristics of social exclusion differ from continent to continent and even country to country. Social exclusion is not merely a thing of past but is very much a current phenomenon and is most likely to continue in the future too. But with the right understanding of the causes as well as the process involved in exclusion, be it the case of individuals or communities, we may be able to contain it within reasonable limits if not eradicate it.

The origin of the concept of social exclusion in modern day literature can be traced to Europe specifically France. Rene Lenoir, with the publication of *Les Exclus* in 1974 is often credited with introducing the term in a social policy context. Lenoir used the term simply to refer those physically, mentally or socially disabled groups who were left outside of the economic and social development of France. Following Lenoir's original work, a vast and rapidly growing literature on social exclusion emerged from all

over the world, with the bulk of it coming out of Europe. And since the 1990s the concept has gained more and more prominence among intellectuals, policy makers and politicians.

European policy makers found the concept of social exclusion more acceptable as it was an innovative and more flexible jargon that avoided the stigma associated with the terms of poverty and destitution. Fundamentally both the concepts of poverty and social exclusion refers to the deficiency or denial of resources and opportunities that affects the participation of an individual or group or community in society on equal terms with others. Both constitute to violation of human dignity. Though the term social exclusion undoubtedly overlaps with the concepts of poverty and deprivation, they are not identical. One of the differences between poverty and social exclusion is that the former gives more importance to material deprivations in terms of low income and lack of ability to meet one's needs, while the latter concept is much wider and highlights the ability of a person or a group to participate in economic, social, cultural as well as political life. Another difference is that while financial security is an essential and indispensable dimension of poverty, social exclusion can happen even when one is financially well-off. For example, exclusions that occur on the basis of gender, race, caste, class, ethnicity, disabilities, illness, old age, geographical isolation etc. Also while poverty is mostly defined as a state of being deprived, social exclusion refers to the processes that lead to exclusion as well as the state of being excluded. Thus social exclusion is much more dynamic and multi-dimensional than the concept of poverty since it deals with a broad range of deprivations along with the process of it. While emphasizing the differences between the two notions it is important to keep in mind that there is a strong mutual relationship between poverty and social exclusion. Social exclusion can lead to poverty and deprivation while persistent poverty in turn may result in social exclusion.

This paper tries to understand the idea of social exclusion, its multiple dimensions and the process by which exclusion occurs. The paper also attempts to examine the idea of social exclusion from the perspective of capability approach.

SOCIAL EXCLUSION: DEFINITION AND DIMENSIONS

Many scholars and policy makers have tried to define the term social exclusion. There is no universally accepted definition for it. The Department of International Development in its policy paper published in 2005 defines social exclusion as follows:

“Social exclusion describes a process by which certain groups are systematically disadvantaged because they are discriminated against on the basis of their ethnicity, race, religion, sexual orientation, caste, descent, gender, age, disability, HIV status, migrant status or where they live. Discrimination occurs in public institutions, such as the legal system or education and health services, as well as social institutions like the household.”

Another definition was given by Levitas (2007): “Social exclusion is a complex and multi-dimensional process. It involves the lack or denial of resources, rights, goods and services, and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities, available to the majority of people in a society, whether in economic, social, cultural, or political arenas. It affects both the quality of life of individuals and the equity and cohesion of society as a whole”

From these definitions, it is clear that excluded individuals or groups experience severe disadvantages as compared to other groups, which affects them in multiple ways. Social exclusion not only affects the material well-being; but the mental and emotional well-being of the individual experiencing it as well. In a society, exclusion is often perpetuated by those institutions and social setups that reflect certain attitudes and values and encourage prejudices, especially those of the dominant groups.

The process of exclusion may be direct and deliberate (for example: denying certain benefits and rights to non-citizens) or as more often happens indirect and unintentional. The exclusion of the disabled from the mainstream is an example. The concept of social exclusion is dynamic in the sense that it requires understanding the processes and identifying the various factors that form the basis of exclusion. Exclusion can occur at multiple levels such as individual, household, community and institutional levels. Another fact that is unanimously agreed about social exclusion is its multidimensionality. Social exclusion encompasses an economic dimension, social and cultural dimension as well as political dimension.

The economic dimension is without doubt the most important or emphasised dimension among the three dimensions of social exclusion. The emphasis given to economic exclusion is evident from the fact that the meaning of the term social exclusion is often equated with economic exclusion. Accumulation and distribution of wealth and resources is a highly unequal process based on power relation, ability of various groups to lobby for their interests and influence government's agenda. Economic exclusion can be broadly understood as the denial or discrimination in access to resources and services leading to unequal participation in economic life. In simpler terms, Economic exclusion means an unequal access to labour market, property, housing, credit, other material and financial assets and also even services such as health care, education etc. It is to be noted that economic exclusion takes account of inequalities in both consumption aspect such as purchase of goods and services and production aspect of economic life i.e. labour market inclusions. Thus economic exclusion involves exclusion of individuals either fully or partially from three basic markets i.e. Labour market, credit market and insurance market.

Socio-cultural exclusion refers to discriminating individuals on the basis of their cultural, racial, ethnic, religious and gender identities based on certain religious beliefs or societal norms. Often individuals or groups as a whole are deprived of fully and meaningfully participating in social life or accessing social infrastructure with same dignity as others. The caste discriminations existing in India, intolerance towards religious minorities, migrants, individuals from LGBT community are examples.

Political exclusion is yet another dimension of social exclusion. This occurs when certain individuals/groups or communities are denied equal political rights or have been side-lined from political participation as compared to the other groups. The different aspects of political exclusion include lack of freedom of expression and equality of opportunities, lack of access to public goods provided by state, denial of rights to organise, barriers to political participation and poor confidence in political processes. One obvious example is, in many countries including India, women does not have equal opportunities for political participation as men.

Thus it is evident that social exclusion involves non-participation in society in various ways, has multiple dimension, occurs at multiple levels and is highly dynamic as well as cumulative in nature.

WHY EXCLUSION NEEDS TO BE ADDRESSED?

First and foremost reason is that it is unjust, unfair, against democratic principles and more importantly against human values. In modern world, where nations and global communities are striving to uphold democratic principles and human rights, exclusion of individuals or communities on various basis seems like a black mark.

There is a solid economic argument against social exclusion as it negatively impacts economic progress of a society. Social exclusion most often prevents certain sections of population from effectively participating in economic life. This not only adversely affects their economic condition but also hinders the growth and development of society or economy as a whole as the potential of a section of population remains unutilized or underutilised. Social exclusion also results in economic inequalities which again impedes economic development.

Another danger associated with social exclusion is security problems. Systematic and constant marginalisation or exclusion of individuals/groups or communities on any basis can lead to resentment and suspicion towards others. This will eventually result in uprisings and conflicts between communities and can destabilize governments as well as economy. For example, the civil war that raged in Sri Lanka a few decades back because the Tamil ethnic groups in the country felt marginalised.

Therefore nations and international organisations should address social exclusion.

THE CONFINES OF MEASURING SOCIAL EXCLUSION

As mentioned earlier the interest in 'social exclusion' is on the rise among members of scientific community ever since the 1990s and as such there has been various attempts to operationalize the concept in empirical terms. Measuring social exclusion is important to understand the concept itself or to get an idea of phenomenon contrary to it like inclusion, social cohesion, well-being etc. or related concepts like marginalisation, deprivation, inequality etc. The impact of policy interventions made by governments and other organisations to overcome exclusion and promote social inclusion and cohesion can be evaluated only when it can be measured and quantified.

Just like no single universally accepted definition of social exclusion exists, there is no consensus regarding the framework, approach, dimensions or indicators used in measuring it. Most of the attempts to quantitatively measure social exclusion are focused on constructing indices with several dimensions or indicators weighted together. While constructing a composite index for measuring social exclusion, it is crucial to assign appropriate weights for economic, social or cultural as well as political components. Even though there is a general agreement that social exclusion is multidimensional and dynamic, there is no consensus regarding which dimensions or indicators are more relevant. There is also debate whether meeting the criteria for deprivation in any one of the dimension is enough to be included as social exclusion. Many frameworks consider poverty and material living conditions as the major dimension while others give more or equal importance to social and political components. Also the weights given to different indicators will vary according to stages of development in different countries. Furthermore several scholars point out that it does not make sense to aggregate economic, social or cultural and political indicators as it is highly possible they may not be moving in the same direction. Therefore some scholars are of the view that rather than a single composite index, a set of economic, social and political indicators appropriate to each scenario will be more beneficial.

Because of all these complications and ambiguities many scholars point out that it is not possible to gain a good understanding of social exclusion with quantitative measures alone. The concept of social exclusion itself is qualitative and dynamic in nature and hence it is crucial to have qualitative measures along with quantitative measure to understand the concept in all its dimensions. The capabilities approach can offer a good theoretical framework that can be a solution to resolve these problems.

CAPABILITIES APPROACH TO SOCIAL EXCLUSION

The capability approach has emerged as a widely accepted alternative approach for evaluating human development and well-being. The capability framework is being extensively used in development studies, studies on poverty and inequality, political philosophy and public policies. It forms the basis of UNDP's Human Development Index (HDI), which is the most celebrated measure of human development across the globe. The approach was first conceived by Amartya Sen in 1970s and further developed by Nussbaum and others over the years. Sen's works changed the course of poverty and inequality studies which earlier relied on

economic indicators alone. The capability approach emphasises the enhancement of people's real freedom to choose the kind of lives they have reasons to value. In other words the capability approach is focused on what people are effectively able to do and be i.e. their capabilities. Capabilities and functionings form the two major elements of the capabilities approach. Although they are closely related, they are not the same.

Functionings refer to the various things a person succeeds in 'doing' and 'being', such as being healthy and well-nourished, being literate, having shelter, having self – respect, participating in social and political life and so on. (Sen, 1999). According to Sen, it is these beings and doings that make life valuable. Capabilities on the other hand denotes the ability or real freedoms a person has to achieve those functionings. Hence the difference between capability and functionings is that of opportunity to achieve and actual achievement. Both the actual achievements and freedom to achieve are taken into account in capability approach.

Sen points out that several factors influence the conversion of material resource or service into actual achievement of beings and doings. Sen refers to them as 'conversion factors' and has categorised these factors into three groups. They are:

- Personal conversion factors: These factors are internal to a person and differs from person to person. These include sex, physical ability, intelligence, etc. For example, a person suffering from autism or learning disabilities may not be able to benefit from traditional educational facilities even if it is easily accessible.
- Social conversion factors: These are factors that are determined by the society in which one lives such as public policies, social norms and practices related to caste, class, race, gender etc. These conversion factors are the most important from the point of view of social exclusion. For instance, a person belonging to lower caste or class may not have the same ability or opportunity to covert resources and services into actual functionings.
- Environmental conversion factors: These factors relate to the physical environment in which a person lives. These include climate, transportation and connectivity, institutions etc.

These factors can positively or negatively influence the capability or freedoms an individual has to convert goods or services into functionings.

Capability approach is superior to resource based, utility based or rights based approaches to social exclusion. Sen criticizes resource based approaches as it fails to acknowledge the fact that individual require differing levels of resources to attain same level of capability to function. People have differing abilities to transform resources into actual functionings. Some of these differences may be physical. For example, a disabled person in wheelchair will need more resources and facilities connected with mobility in addition to normal transportation facilities. Another example is that a pregnant women needs more nutrients than a non-pregnant women to achieve similar level of health functioning. And some of the differences in the ability to transform resource into functionings are social and associated with discriminations of varying nature. These are the differences that Sen is preoccupied with. To give an example, in a society where females are traditionally discouraged from participating in labour market, it will take more resources and effort to produce higher female employment rates than male employment. Hence Sen argues for equality of capabilities rather than equality of resources.

Sen also points out that the utilitarian approach to welfare is often influenced by 'adaptive preferences' i.e. preferences that have adjusted to people's status or position. Thus the utilitarian framework, under which people are asked to rate their level of satisfaction, may lead to incorrect or inadequate results in the case of social exclusion as those experiencing exclusion may have formed their preferences based on their lower status.

Rights based perspectives regard exclusion as denial of human rights. The concept of human rights is not a crystal clear notion as it can be interpreted in a number of ways. Capabilities approach although very similar to human rights approach, gives more precision and supplementation to the language of rights. In the case of social exclusion, people or groups experiencing discrimination may have rights according to the existing laws of the country, but may not be able to full exercise them in all its actual connotations. For instance, in many countries around the world, women have a nominal right of political participation without actually having this right in terms of capability. Therefore Nussbaum argues that many of the rights like right to freedom of religion, right to freedom of expression, right to political participation etc. can be best understood as secured to people only when the appropriate capabilities to function are present. Inequalities in the capability to exercise individual and collective rights can result in a social hierarchy, made up of first class and second class citizens.

Amartya Sen, the pioneer of capabilities approach, himself suggests that the approach can be useful in understanding social exclusion. According to him social exclusion is a form of capability deprivation closely connected to the notion of poverty. Sen gives two reasons to value not being excluded. One relate to the intrinsic importance of social relations and the other relate to the instrumental significance of social relations. First, is that being excluded in itself can be a capability deprivation. An understanding of the significance of meaningfully taking part in community life can be traced back to the Aristotelian proposition that all human beings are social animals and live an inescapable social life. Another example is Adam smith's focus on "being able to appear in public without shame." For example, not being able to take part in social life with dignity can directly impact a person's life. That person may experience low self-esteem, lack of confidence, loss of identity and being not able to connect with others. Other examples

include being denied voting rights, being unable to read and write as a result of lack of access to education and so on. Sen calls this 'constitutive relevance' of social exclusion.

Second, there are certain relational deprivations that may not be bad themselves but are instrumental in nature and can lead to other fierce forms of deprivations. For instance, lack of access to education can result in greater chances of unemployment and thus income poverty. Similarly, landlessness can be an instrumental deprivation. In an agrarian society, being landless can be a major limitation. Another example is not making use of credit market facilities may not be intrinsically bad, but experiencing poverty or forgoing interesting opportunities due to lack of access to credit is an instance of 'instrumental importance' of social exclusion. Thus on one hand social exclusion can be seen as a state and process leading to deprivation and on the other hand it can be viewed as something that reinforces other forms of deprivation. The distinction between constitutive relevance and instrumental importance of social exclusion can help in understanding the nature and extent of social exclusion in a better manner.

Another distinction that can be useful in understanding social exclusion is between active and passive exclusion. The difference between active and passive exclusion is whether the exclusion happens as a result of deliberate attempt to exclude or not. An example of active exclusion is when immigrants or refugees are denied political rights or social security benefits. This is common in many European and Asian countries. Often these kinds of active exclusion can bring about certain other exclusionary consequences too that were not intended. Withholding political rights can make it difficult for immigrants to integrate successfully into new country. Denying social security measures can push them into poverty or other forms of deprivation. When deprivation happens as a result of social processes and there is no deliberate attempt to exclude individual/groups, the exclusion is termed passive exclusion. Lack of access to services and amenities experienced by disabled individuals is an example of passive exclusion. Sen points out that even when exclusion is passive in nature, where there is no deliberate attempt to exclude someone, it is the responsibility of the governments or policy makers to find remedy to the situation.

It is important to keep in mind that not all forms of deprivations can be treated as exclusion. For instance, a person suffering from malnourishment due to his eating habits or choice of diet cannot be treated as socially excluded. Likewise an individual who denies modern medical treatment because of his religious beliefs can't be considered as socially excluded. A situation of deprivation can be termed as social exclusion only when it happens involuntarily. Social exclusion can arise in a variety of ways and even every involuntary deprivation cannot be termed as social exclusion. For example, take the case of hunger or starvation as a deprivation. Not all cases of involuntary starvation can be treated as social exclusion. A farmer and his family suffering from starvation due to crop failure, starvation resulting from job lose, hunger due to fall in real wages as a result of price hike of food products etc. cannot be considered under social exclusion. Therefore the tendency to dress up every deprivation as a case of social exclusion should be avoided.

WHY CAPABILITIES APPROACH TO SOCIAL EXCLUSION?

The strengths of capability approach in exploring social exclusion that are evident from earlier discussions is pointed out as follows:

- Social exclusion is much more dynamic and multi-dimensional than just lack of income and material things or inaccessibility to resources and services. Therefore an approach that can capture the dynamic and multi-dimensional nature of the concept is crucial to understanding it. The capability approach which focuses on the freedoms (capabilities) that people have, to lead the kind of lives they value and to be the person they want to be is an excellent solution.
- Another advantage of capability approach in examining social exclusion is that it takes into account human diversity. The capability approach considers inter-personal variations in the conversion of commodities and services into functionings.
- The approach also gives emphasis to both the intrinsic as well as instrumental significance of social cohesion and integration.
- The ability of capability approach to reflect whether deprivations are enforced or voluntary non-participation is yet another strength of the approach in understanding social exclusion. The approach even distinguishes between active and passive forms of exclusion.
- Lastly, the fact that the capability approach makes use of both quantitative and qualitative measures to analyse well-being makes the approach far superior than any other approach in exploring social exclusion.

CONCLUSION

The growing literature on social exclusion helps in understanding the barriers that societies and other institutions have erected against certain individuals/groups/communities from meaningfully and effectively participating in key areas of life. Having a dignified existence without prejudices and with real freedoms is an indisputable right of every human being. Social exclusion is a multi-dimensional and dynamic process that occurs at multiple levels. While examining social exclusion, it important to explore the economic, socio-cultural as well as political dimensions of exclusion. If not addressed, social exclusions can adversely impact entire societies and economy, and not just individuals or groups suffering exclusion. It can impede economic progress of a society or nation and can pose serious security threats. It is the responsibility of governments and other organisations to tackle and contain exclusions

and associated deprivations within limits. Only when social exclusion can be appropriately measured, the impact of policy interventions made by governments and others to tackle exclusion and promote social integration can be evaluated. As in the case of definition, there is no unanimity regarding the framework or approach for studying social exclusion. It is in this context, the article attempted to critically examine the notion of social exclusion from the perspective of capability approach. Exclusion in itself is a capability deprivation and it can also be instrumental in leading to other obvious forms of capability deprivations. Social exclusion through the lens of capability approach has great potential in understanding it and making policy interventions.

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