Urban Poverty among Indians in Malaysia: A naturalistic Inquiry

Mahaganapathy Dass[1], Sarjit S. Gill[2], Ma'rof Redzuan[3] and Nobaya Ahmad[4]

[1,2,3,4]Department of Social and Developmental Sciences, Faculty of Human Ecology, University Putra, Malaysia, 43400 UPM Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia. (tel-60389467062)
[1]E-mail mahaganapathydass@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper presents the potential significant factors of urban poverty among the minority Indian community in Malaysia through community development practice. Preliminary study was conducted at Lembah Pantai which is a well known urban squatters destination in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. In-depth interview which was used as the qualitative data collection method helped the researchers to holistically understand the community status, issues which can influence urban poverty. Apart from that community development domains such as participation, empowerment and capacity building are also highlighted in the study. This study reveals that the community is still facing many problems. They also argue that the developmental programs by the government are carried out by not empowering the community. However, the community feels that their problems can be solved if the community can be free of alcoholism and gangterism. It is hoped that the findings of this study will contribute to existing literature in urban poverty ground that could be an addition to the social capital theory current standing.
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1. Introduction

Malaysia is a multi ethnic country rich with varieties of cultures, background, language and customs with 29 million population in the year 2012 that comprises Malay, Chinese and Indian. Ever since from 1950s and after independence Malaysian government carried various efforts to reduce poverty through implementation of policies and direct support to the nation (Mok et. al, 2007).

Jomo (2004) condemned the New Economic Policy (NEP) which was initiated in 1970 as a great failure. According to the scholars, the objective of the policy to eradicate poverty regardless race was not implemented well. The policy was more concentrated in rural areas targeting the majority Malay community. Apparently the government of Malaysia has successfully diminishes poverty to 5.7% by 2004 (Hatta and Ali, 2013). As a result, the poverty line has been reduced through driving forces of eradicating hardcore poverty. The journey of preventing poverty begins from adjustment for inflation and household sizes from 1957 until current duration (Hatta and Ali, 2013). The target of poverty eradication is primarily targeting the rural areas without neglecting the urban areas. Kunasekaran et, al. (2011) mentioned that Malaysia farmers in rural areas of the country are encouraged to involve in tourism activities to eradicate poverty. Apart from that, the Orang Asli community (native people) also started to commercialize their culture to add some income (Kunasekaran et, al., 2011).

Apparently the Indian community was brought to Malaysia by British empowerment as labourers. A large number of Indians was brought form South India in nineteenth and early twentieth century (Rose, 1962). As a result the settlement of Indians began from estates where they worked at rubber plantations and lived in estates. However today the demographic changes that takes place had direct impact towards Indian community in major cities of Malaysia. As a result mostly Indians are high densely populated in urban areas (Ramasamy, 1993).

In addition to that after independence of Malaysia in 1957 through good governance, Indians enriched themselves with quality education and migrated from estates to urbanized townships to gain value by engage into successful jobs that shine their living status. The rise in industrialization has led the migration of Indians to the urban cities of Malaysia. In search of a more promising job for the survival of their family many move to the urban regions of the country. Arriving at cities, unprepared and unequipped for the reality awaiting them there, many end up unemployed or employed receiving meager wage insufficient for a decent living (Marimuthu, 1975).This resulted in the forming of squatter areas thus categorizing these individuals or even families as the urban poor.

The Indian squatter settlers was concentrated in West Malaysia. However the biggest population was largely at the outskirt of Kuala Lumpur and Klang Valley (Nagarajan, 2008). Moreover as the years

passing, the Indian community together with other communities in Malaysia showed a tremendous growth of career and educational achievements (Arokiasamy, 2010). Despite this event the large Indian population that is concentrated is having socio economic and cultural disputes as their survival and living status in urbanization development (Jayasooria, 2006).

In Malaysia, the urban poverty statistics between 1970 until 2000 shows Indians holds largely about 80% from total population of Malaysia (Nair, 2009). This problem is encountered from unregulated labour regulations, poor working conditions and lack of job security. However the Malay population is covering largely in rural poverty of Malaysia. This issue was resulted from low educational, low skills, low income, low status of employment and poor housing in rural areas with inappropriate of basic amenities. As a result this phenomena affects them to lead a high level of stress and daily struggle to earn a living (Jayasooria, 2002). Unlike the main communities, some indigenous groups of the country are also actively involved in tourism to eradicate poverty (Kunasekaran, Gill and Ma'rof, 2013).

The issue of urban poverty among could be dominated by high number of workers from overseas (Kim, 2009). As a result the migrant from other countries is another problem that is surrounding the poverty line. Thus the employment opportunities has a direct effect on urban poor which resulted into low income and unemployment (Hatta and Ali, 2013). Apparently Malaysia is a growing country where rapid development takes place so there is a high demand for skilled and knowledgeable human resources needed. As a result an increase in foreign labor power is supporting the growth of Malaysia's economy (Kuruvilla and Arudsothy, 1995).

This situation could be related in other developing and populated countries as Mumbai, India where it is projected to attain 33 million of population. This statistic resulted from rapid urbanization development which can transform into urban poverty (Hossain, 2005). Despite this diversity, the incidence of poverty resulted from income inequality where they suffered loss of shelter, food and essential expenses. In fact income inequality and poverty has become a worried phenomena in multiracial society in Malaysia (Kusnic and DaVanzo, 1982). According to Talib et. al., (2013), inequality can harm the ethnic tolerance in Malaysia. Although the Indian ethnic are facing numerous challenges but the government and Malaysian civil society are still carrying effort to avoid this dilemma.

2. Material and Methods

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 1996) described that urban poverty often more dangerous and extreme if compared to rural poverty. The world authority body also stated that this phenomenon is rapidly spreading in the region of South Asia. The past studies of urban poverty shows that the subject of urban poverty is seen from either the economic poverty or multidimensional poverty.

A majority of scholars identified urban poverty as an economic phenomenon, and determine indicators of poverty in material formations. According to the interpretations of urban poverty of economic perspective, four distinct levels of poverty can be classified;

i) Extreme form of poverty

ii) The ranks of the very poor who have bare minimal level of living

iii) The poor who are marginally above the level of subsistence

iv) The people with low incomes – the relatively poor (Atal, 1997).

However Oyen (1997) sees urban poverty from various perspectives as it can be described within several modes of aspects:

- Poverty as lack of scarcity of individual resources, which poverty in this mode is seen as a result of the individual having little or no access to resources that are vital to overcome poverty. Resources can be defined as basic necessities for survival, as material as well as non-material means which can lead to a better standard of living and finally as an access to social goods and participation which gives the individual better control on his or her owns life situation. Examples of such resources are food, income, education, housing, access to clean water and health measures, access to participation in civil society, and so on.

- Poverty as related to social fabric and internal forces. In this mode, the focus is on the social organisation of the poor and how internal forces in the poor and how internal forces in the poor communities create and sustain poverty.

- Poverty as related to external forces and a lack of opportunity structure. This mode directs the attention towards society at large. Society is seen as a set of opportunity structures which allows individuals to change station in life. Examples of such structures are the educational system, the labour market and ownership, openness of social networks, and access to participation in civil society. However, the poor are not in a situation where they can make use of these structures. Within this mode poverty can be seen as either the general lack of opportunity

structures in a society, or as the restricted access to such opportunity structures for people in poverty.

Apart from the studies above explaining the urban poverty perspectives, some studies are done to understand the demographics of the poor people in the urban areas. Dissimilarly characteristics of the urban poor (Salleh and Ghaffar, 2009) can be seen in three aspects:

The economics of the urban poor: Urban poor are categorized so mainly based on their income level and employment type and sector. These two characteristics are usually related to other social characteristics like the level of education attained and the level of literacy. Urban poor are those who fall below a certain income level to meet their basic needs. The low economic status in turn influences the ability of these urban poor to find suitable shelter.

Household living conditions of the urban poor: Most of the urban poor lack access to safe and affordable housing, many even build their own makeshift shelters out of cardboard, plywood, zinc, and even scrap of metals. These houses are often in dilapidated conditions, lack of ventilation and proper lighting system. Due to their building materials the houses are usually either too hot or too cold to stay. The occupancy rate of each household is usually high with extended families staying together, thus overcrowding and cramped conditions are common characteristics of these poor households. Due to limited space, houses of the urban poor are usually also susceptible to indoor pollution usually from open fires and insufficient stoves from cooking. One of the most important characteristics of the urban poor household is the lack of clean water. This refers to both the quantity and quality of water.

Neighborhood environment: The urban poor are forced to make trade-offs between affordable housing and environmental safety and protection. Thus, they are forced to live in settlements situated on government or “no-man’s” land where rent is cheap. Due to limited land area and the large number of population, these marginal settlements are usually densely populated, with crowded houses, with no proper layout, built in a haphazard manner without proper streets and pathways. There are also little or no provision of public open space and facilities for children and young adults for play, sports and social life. Another major characteristics of the poor settlements are inadequate or non-provision of a proper garbage collection system and a waste disposal ground.

United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA) in 2006 has highlighted nine differences between urban and rural poverty, comprising urban workers' livelihoods depend on access (both social and physical) to jobs; the ability of the urban informal sector to absorb the unemployed is limited; the urban poor are more vulnerable to changes in market conditions; female-headed households, the most vulnerable of the poor, are more common in cities; the urban poor tend to pay more for services; city dwellers tend to favor higher quality or more convenient foods, which are generally more expensive; the urban poor share fewer communal assets that could shield them from individual circumstances, for instance, health conditions, employer decisions; urban exchange is more monetized, making assets and credit availability more important; and finally exposure to environmental risks (pathogens and toxins) is greater in cities.

The World Bank Group (2007) defined urban poverty as a multidimensional phenomenon, and listed out five dimensions of poverty, which are income poverty, health poverty, education poverty, personal insecurity, tenure insecurity as well as disempowerment. Apart from that, Asian Development Bank (2007) also defines that urban poverty should not be subjected to economic status but must be associated with poor health and education, deprivation in knowledge and communications, inability to exercise human and political rights, and low self-esteem.

Snowballing (Cooper and Schindler, 1998) and theoretical sampling (Minichiello, 1991) are the combined selection procedures that will be used to carry out this research. Snowball sampling means the researcher gets to know the following respondent from the previous respondent. After gaining information from the first respondent, gaps can be identified to whom to speak to next. This is when theoretical sampling will be used. The naturalistic inquiry technique will provide a set of data which is not biased where the real problem in the community can be understood. The data from the naturalistic inquiry was analyzed using a discourse analysis technique. Content analysis is a systematic, replicable technique for compressing many words of text into fewer content categories, based on explicit rules of coding (Weber 1990).

3. Analysis and Discussions

Generally it can be argued that the studies on urban poverty is still not adequate in Malaysia. most of the studies are concentrated in rural poverty on general poverty issues of the nation. One of the leading scholar in Malaysian urban poverty studies also stressed the importance to study on urban poverty:

"The studies specifically on urban poverty are there but very few...in fact only in the year 2000 some scholars started to look into urban poverty research. The studies on rural poverty are being dominant.

May be growing concerns of rising prices of things and rapid urbanization will provide importance to understand more on urban poverty" (personal communication, Emeritus Professor Chamhuri Siwar, urban poverty scholar).

This can be referred where the research on urban poverty about Malaysia has been focused into determinants, Malays in rural areas and migrants urban poverty in Malaysia (Nair, 2009). This shows that the past studies has specified on general research about urban poverty in Malaysia. Besides that the urbanization that takes place has resulted towards an increase of Indian and Malay ethnics in urban areas of Malaysia.

"There are several factors of urban poverty in Malaysia. Income, education, health, facilities, environment...It is important to understand that the poverty is not always measure economically...it is multidimensional (mainly economic and also non-economic)" (personal communication, Emeritus Professor Chamhuri Siwar, urban poverty scholar)

This research will be highlighting the issue of urban poverty among Indians in Kuala Lumpur. Since no specific study has not been conducted so this research could provide positive outcome for the community in future. Siwar and Kasim (1997) also argued that the studies of urban poverty in Malaysia is inadequate and mainly concentrate in squatter areas. On the other hand the main causes of Indian socio economic as urban poverty can be described as unemployment or underemployment, low wages, high inflation rate and expensive urbanized lifestyle. According to a key informant of the community, it is not difficult to find jobs in Klang Valley, but they are not empowered both their employees and the government.

"We are poor because we can't get good jobs...nobody wants to trust us and give us a job..the see us as gangsters only...how to come out from poverty if the outsiders such as government and private sectors do not give us better jobs and business contracts?" (personal communication, Saminathan, Head of the community in Lembah Pantai)

In addition to that the socio economic act as a determinant of Indian urban poverty through employment and income (Sandhu, 2008). The employment level among Indians has increased their level of dependency due to family commitments. Moreover the effect of unemployment is due to lack of skills, lack of educational qualification and underestimate of occupation in Klang Valley (Mani, 2009). As a result the unemployment status has created reduction on their self confidence and dignity of the families. The studies of Sandhu (2008) and Mani (2009) however failed to explore the influence of community empowerment on the urban poverty.

This shows that poverty among Indians is align with Malay in rural areas as they are also facing the similar socio economic disputes. Despite this dilemma the migrants workers issue is dominating the factor of unemployment among Indian community in Malaysia (Hatta and Ali, 2013). As a result the inequality income plays a dominant role in eradicating Indian ethnic to live in urbanization development. Apparently due to low income of job, they find insufficient of capital to spend mainly for food, rent, transport and other necessary expenses. This situation arises from poor budgeting and unnecessary expenditure on alcohol and luxury goods (Jeyakumar, 2008).

In fact this phenomena is also similar among poor Malays and Chinese in urban areas. This could be referred where educational achievements of Bumiputera and rural students is a fundamental for economic growth of Malaysia (Hatta and Ali, 2013). In addition to that the poverty is becoming a disease towards urban communities into poor family units in urbanized settings (Hatta and Ali, 2013). In early stage of Indian settlement begin from squatters in Kuala Lumpur, Klang Valley, Johor Bahru, Butterworth and Penang. The settlement was largely focused on outskirts of Kuala Lumpur such as Old Klang Road, the Federal Highway, Cheras, Sentul, Selayang and Damansara including Petaling Jaya (Rajoo, 1993).

As this settlement were growing, there were many migrants from estates came to cities for earnings and job. As a result Indians mostly attached to Malayan Railway, City Council and Petaling Jaya Municipality which made their journey starts as urban living. Today the rising cost of urban living make them to find new job opportunities or getting into unhealthy lifestyle (Sandhu, 2008). This dilemma is surrounding the Indian ethnic into urban poverty of lowly paid jobs, low self esteem, low savings and poor community cooperation (Jeyakumar, 2008).

Socio cultural issue is another problem for urban poverty among Indian community in Malaysia where the working class background plays an essential role as a culture of poverty. This issue could be referred as poor parental guidance or responsibility, excessive drinking, low self respect, female subordination, depressed and apathetic community (Rajoo, 2008).

"We must agree that our youths are involved in gangterism, alchohol and drugs. These activities are the main reasons of our situation (urban poverty) now. There is no consistent income...they go in and out of jail like they go holidays..." (personal

communication, Saminathan, Head of the community in Lembah Pantai)

This unhealthy lifestyle was brought from living condition in plantation where the subculture of poverty among Indian could not be prevented. As a result the negative cultural traits is becoming a necessity among Indian community which discouraging them from being a developed nation by the year 2020.

Conclusion

The initial investigation shows that the community is facing many social problems because of urban poverty. They argued that their participation in developmental projects are very limited. The empowerment also failed to materialize making the community not strong collectively. They strongly believe that if the community is empowered, it can create many positive outcomes. Apart from that, the community also agrees that urban poverty mainly happen because of their own attitude and mentality. Major social issues like alcoholism and gangsterism are not new to the community and spreading very fast among the younger generation. Thus, a holistic study need to be carried out to verify the arguments and to suggest appropriate policy implications to the relevant stakeholders in the county.

Corresponding Author:
Associate Professor Dr. Sarjit S. Gill
Department of Social and Developmental Sciences Faculty of Human Ecology, University Putra Malaysia, 43400, Serdang, Malaaysia E-mail: mahaganapathydass@gmail.com

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