

Beyond External Interventions: The Role of Spirituality in Reducing Poverty and Inequality for Sustainable Development

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Abstract: Development cannot be considered sustainable if it fails to alleviate poverty and inequality. Poverty and inequality result from both external and internal factors. Conventional development strategies focus almost exclusively on external and material aspects, such as the provision of capital, technology, knowledge, and skills, based on the assumption that these are the primary determinants of poverty. While acknowledging the importance of external interventions, this paper highlights the need to integrate spirituality, understood as freeing the mind from conditioning, into development strategies to effectively reduce poverty and inequality and promote sustainability. Spiritual development involves a process of inner transformation from the ordinary state of mind, which is driven by desires, aversions, and resulting self-centeredness, to a state of mind governed by the Spirit, the pristine, unconditioned consciousness in which the self–other division is absent and actions arise from a whole-centered perspective. Although this state is inherent in all individuals, it is often overshadowed by psychological conditioning. Thus, spiritual growth requires a process of freeing the mind from conditioning. Drawing on a review of literature, experiential insights gained by the authors through contemplative practices, and preliminary findings from a field survey, the findings challenge conventional poverty discourse by suggesting that sustainable development requires not only structural interventions but also inner transformation. Practical recommendations include integrating mindset training, cross-class dialogue, and values-based education into poverty alleviation programs.

Keywords: poverty, spirituality, sustainable development, agency, structural conditioning, Identity, self-centeredness, motivation, desire, responsibility.

Introduction

Sustainability literally means the ability of humankind to sustain itself indefinitely. It is defined depending on the context in which the term is used. Following the concept and definition of sustainability presented in the Brundtland Report [1], there is a general agreement that sustainability entails meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. This definition, however, addresses only the temporal dimension of sustainability, focusing on sustainability over time and the pursuit of justice for future generations. It does not recognize the possibility of an individual, community, or country meeting its needs at the expense of another individual, community, or country's ability to meet theirs. Today's world is so closely interconnected and interdependent that powerful individuals, communities, and countries are able to meet their needs at the expense of the ability of their powerless counterparts to meet theirs. If any member of human society meets their needs at the expense of another's ability, society cannot sustain itself indefinitely. Furthermore, this definition does not acknowledge the importance of happiness as the ultimate goal of human life. Therefore, Ulluwishewa [2] proposed

a definition which accommodates both temporal and spatial dimensions of sustainability as well as happiness; *Sustainability is the ability of any individual, community or country to meet their needs and live happily without compromising the ability of other individuals, communities, countries and future generations to meet their needs and live happily.* Meeting one's needs without compromising the ability of others to meet their needs and live happily demands a unique behavior in individuals, communities, and countries. They must act, not only for their own well-being but also for the well-being of others, including the generations to come. They must perceive themselves, not as separate entities but as integral parts of the whole. They must seek to enhance the collective happiness, the total sum of the happiness of all members of the human society. This requires a fundamental behavioral transformation; a transformation from behaving as separate self-centered entities to behaving as integral parts of the whole, transformation from self-centeredness to whole-centeredness or separateness to oneness. This is where spirituality becomes necessary to achieve sustainability as a means to achieve this inner transformation.

Reducing poverty and inequality is widely acknowledged as a crucial goal of sustainable development [3], yet achieving sustainability remains elusive as long as poverty and inequality persist at their current levels. We argue that addressing poverty and inequality requires more than conventional approaches that focus solely on external interventions because poverty and inequality are outcomes of both external and internal factors. This paper aims to highlight the significance of these internal factors, particularly the spiritual underdevelopment of both wealthy and impoverished individuals, and underscore the necessity of integrating spirituality into poverty reduction projects and policies. At the outset, this paper explores spirituality as a means of freeing minds from conditioning, and then it examines how this mental conditioning perpetuates poverty and inequality. Then, it explains how freeing minds from conditioning could effectively reduce poverty and inequality. Finally, the paper offers policy recommendations and concludes with reflections on these insights.

Literature Review

Poverty is defined in simple terms as 'pronounced deprivation in well-being' [4]. The poor are those individuals whose income or consumption is below what is socially acceptable as a minimum living standard [4]. The UNDP-Oxford Multidimensional Poverty Measure (MPM) expands the understanding of poverty beyond income, incorporating access to education, health, and standard of living, while retaining the \$3.00/day international poverty line as a key dimension [5,6]. In terms of defining who is wealthy or affluent, a multidimensional phenomenon, Cocialdi [7] states that the rich are those whose income exceeds an empirically defined affluence line. That is the level above which any additional income could be redistributed to eliminate poverty while still maintaining full societal participation for all. Despite substantial investments over many decades, poverty and inequality continue to afflict communities worldwide.

The literature suggests that the human mind has two aspects: the pristine state of mind and the conditioned mind. The former, referred to as the Human Spirit or consciousness by Lonergan [8] represents the authentic or pristine state of mind, characterized by a sense of oneness and the absence of a self-versus-other dichotomy. The latter, also referred to as the Psyche by Helminiak [9], is conditioned primarily by desires, aversions, and the sense of self, and secondarily by identification with beliefs, values, attitudes, culture, religion, race, nationality, and ideologies. Spirituality, in this context, refers to the process of freeing the mind from such conditioning and aligning it with the pristine mind or Spirit.

In academic literature, spirituality is commonly understood as an inner phenomenon that transcends basic survival instincts and mental programming. Turner (1999, p. 41 [10]) describes spirituality as "that which comes from within beyond the survival instincts of the mind," while Guillory (p. 33 [11]) similarly defines it as "our inner consciousness," emphasizing that spirituality emerges from within and lies beyond our conditioned beliefs and values. This deeper reality within is referenced across disciplines using various terms such as Human Consciousness by Lonergan [8], Human Spirit by Helminiak [9], Higher Force by McDaniel [12], Transcendental Consciousness by Eijk [13], and the Quantum Self by Zohar [14]. In Sinhalese, this concept is expressed as Adhyātmaya, derived from the Sanskrit words Ādhi (noble/highest) and Āthma (individual), referring to the highest state an individual can attain.

Many religious traditions affirm that this elevated state is not externally acquired but is inherent in every human being. It is referred to variously in different religions as the "Buddha Within" by Rahula [15], "God Within," in Bhagavad Gita, or "the Kingdom of God Within" in the Bible (Luke 17:20). These concepts emphasize the notion that at our core lies a pristine state of mind, free from desires, aversions, and the illusion of a separate self. In this state, the individual transcends personal biases and separateness, achieving harmony, compassion, wisdom, creativity, and joy. This understanding of inner potential is not exclusive to religious thought; recent advances in neuroscience support this view. Cozolino [16], for example, emphasizes that the human brain is a social organ, designed to connect and communicate with others, much like the interaction of neurons. Lieberman [17] reinforces this view, stating that the

need to connect socially is more fundamental to human beings than even the need for food and shelter. Furthermore, Pfaff [18] [19] provides neuroscientific evidence that the human brain is hardwired for altruism and the Golden Rule, treating others as one would like to be treated oneself. In his book, *The Altruistic Brain*, Pfaff [19] argues that spontaneous kindness and prosocial behavior are innate human tendencies, rather than learned behaviors.

Despite this intrinsic potential, individuals often live guided not by their pristine inner state but by a conditioned mind. The conditioning of the mind can be understood through the analogy of rainwater flowing along previously formed gullies. When rain falls on an open landscape, the water initially has no fixed path; it flows freely in all directions. However, as the water repeatedly follows specific routes, small channels form. Over time, these channels deepen into gullies, and future rainwater automatically follows these pre-existing paths rather than flowing freely. Similarly, the human mind, in its pristine state, is open and whole-centered, responding to life without being restricted by past experiences. However, as we go through life, attachments, aversions, and the sense of self carve deep pathways in our neural structures. Repeated experiences of pleasure reinforce attachments, while experiences of discomfort reinforce aversions. These experiences shape our thoughts, emotions, and reactions, much like water being guided by established gullies. Once these pathways are formed, thoughts no longer flow freely but are drawn into familiar patterns, often without our conscious awareness.

Conditioning arises from both primary and secondary influences. Primary conditioning is universal, resulting from how individuals perceive themselves and the world through sensory input. Through the mechanism of neuroplasticity, the brain's capacity to rewire itself based on experience, this perception of separateness is 'soft-wired' into the brain [20]. Consequently, individuals develop a sense of a distinct self and are driven by desires for pleasurable experiences and aversions to painful ones. When pleasurable experiences occur, the brain produces pleasure-inducing neurochemicals, predominantly one known as dopamine; conversely, painful or uncomfortable experiences lead to negative chemical responses. These repetitive reactions reinforce selfish behaviors and deepen the sense of separateness, even at the cost of others' well-being and the health of the environment. In this conditioned state, behaviors are regulated by self-centered desires rather than by the brain's inherent potential for whole-centeredness: the hardwired principles of altruism, universal love, and ethical reciprocity are overshadowed by soft-wired, conditioned impulses. As a result, individuals operate within a framework of mental limitations, failing to embody the compassionate and selfless qualities associated with their spiritual core.

Secondary conditioning, on the other hand, refers to culture-specific and class-specific programming. From early childhood, individuals absorb beliefs, values, behavioral norms, attitudes, ideologies, theories, and habits from their social environments. These become soft-wired in the brain and act as filters through which individuals interpret reality. Such conditioning can be so deeply embedded that individuals respond to life situations not freely or consciously but based on habitual emotional and cognitive patterns. These patterns limit openness, spontaneity, and an accurate understanding of oneself and others. Spirituality, therefore, involves freeing the mind from conditioned patterns, both primary and secondary, and reconnecting with the innate, unconditioned essence within. It calls for awareness of one's conditioned thoughts and behaviors and allowing the innate pure state of mind to express its inherent qualities through thoughts and actions. Thus, spirituality, as framed both in religious teachings and scientific findings, is the process of freeing the mind from its conditioning. It is about rediscovering the deep-seated qualities of Spirit. By recognizing and overcoming the forces of mental conditioning, individuals can awaken to a more authentic, peaceful, and compassionate way of being, one that reflects the innate unity of all life and honors the profound potential embedded in every human being.

Data Collection and Methods

This study adopted a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods approach, rooted in an interpretivist paradigm, to explore how internal and external conditioning influences individuals' trajectories in relation to poverty and wealth. A convergent parallel design was used, enabling simultaneous collection and interpretation of qualitative and quantitative data [21]. The qualitative component consisted of narrative reflections and interviews, allowing participants to articulate lived experiences. At the same time, a structured questionnaire captured attitudes toward education, agency, and socio-economic behavior through narratives and Likert-scale items. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns across the four socio-economic categories studied, with coding guided by the six-phase method proposed by Braun and Clarke [22]. Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively and visualized through stacked bar charts to highlight collective attitudes. To deepen interpretive richness, participant quotes were used to contextualize statistical trends. The analysis was also informed by philosophical insights from Buddhist psychology, which supported a deeper understanding of identity, desire, and conditioning. Trustworthiness was

enhanced through researcher reflexivity, triangulation of data sources, and the integration of diverse perspectives across socio-economic backgrounds [23].

This paper is based on data derived from four sources: (1) a review of literature on the science of spirituality, and economics, sociology, and psychology of poverty and inequality; (2) insights gained by the second and third authors introspective journey of over two decades through non-judgmental observation of thoughts, speech and actions; and (3) preliminary findings from a survey and (4) participant observation.

The second source of data, the insights gained by the second and third authors, is based on the philosophical premise that all humans, regardless of socioeconomic status, share common psychological structures shaped by desires, fears, aversions, and self-preservation. The introspective reflections of the two authors were not seen as separate from the subject of inquiry but rather as a valid lens through which to explore universal patterns of consciousness. This approach is grounded in phenomenology [24], heuristic inquiry [25], and first-person methodologies in cognitive science [26], all of which affirm the value of self-reflection in accessing shared human experience. Researchers' introspection and non-judgmental observation of thoughts, emotions, and behaviors are used in psychology, design research, and consumer research as a research method [27] [28] [29] [30] [31]. Introspection, as Gould (1995, p.719 [32] defines it, is 'an ongoing process of tracking, experiencing, and reflecting on one's own thoughts, mental images, feelings, sensations, and behaviors'. To address potential subjectivity, insights were triangulated with a broad literature review and field data. Cross-disciplinary sources, ranging from neuroscience to contemplative traditions, support the notion of an unconditioned state of awareness that transcends the self-other divide, often associated with the deactivation of the brain's default mode network during meditation. Field interviews with both rich and poor participants further validated introspective observations. For instance, the insight that people avoid transformative action when discomfort outweighs future aspirations was echoed in participant narratives. Some poor individuals, despite similar external conditions, exhibited drive and change, while others did not reflect internal dynamics observed introspectively. By integrating self-inquiry with empirical validation, this study offers a nuanced and psychologically informed account of poverty and inequality, bridging inner and outer dimensions often overlooked in development discourse.

Through the meditation experience of the two authors, it was observed that initial thoughts tend to be self-centered and emotionally charged. Through non-reactive, non-judgmental awareness, these thoughts diminished in frequency and intensity, allowing attention to shift toward the subtler affective tone of the unconditioned mind, often described as peaceful and spacious. This shift highlighted a potential for alignment with deeper states of consciousness characterized by peace, compassion, and clarity, attributes regarded as foundational in many spiritual traditions. These experiential insights informed the design of the study's interview guide, which aimed to uncover the psychological conditioning of both wealthy and poor individuals and their role in perpetuating poverty and inequality. Furthermore, the insights contributed to the development of a conceptual mind map that links internal psychological patterns with external socioeconomic outcomes, thereby bridging subjective introspection with empirical analysis.

The field survey involved guided interviews with 34 individuals selected from both wealthy and impoverished families in the Kobeigane Grama Sevaka (GS) Division of the Kurunegala District in Sri Lanka.

Results and Discussion

The preliminary results of the survey identified four categories among the interviewees: (1) born poor and continue in poverty, (2) born poor but escaped poverty, (3) born rich and continue to be rich (4) born rich but failed to sustain wealth. The results explain how the spiritual underdevelopment of all four categories, which is reflected in mind-conditioning, has contributed to the perpetuation of poverty and inequality. If the mind is not conditioned and free, it remains in its pristine state. Such a mind is naturally sensitive to the authentic needs of themselves, others, and the nature around them, and spontaneously acts for the well-being of all. Theoretically speaking, in a society of such people, poverty and inequality cannot exist. On the other hand, in the real world where we live, our minds are conditioned and therefore not free. We are driven primarily by desires to experience pleasure and comfort, to avoid pain and discomfort, to feed, defend, and enhance our self-image, identification with beliefs, values, habits, attitudes, ideologies, and theories.

The thematic analysis reveals how psychological (primary) and sociocultural (secondary) conditioning deeply shape economic trajectories. Individuals who remain poor often carry mental models shaped by learned helplessness and external dependency, which undermine their capacity for delayed gratification. Conversely, those who rise from poverty demonstrate a shift in self-concept and the adoption of new belief systems that promote future-oriented thinking and self-agency. The findings affirm that transforming poverty and inequality demands more than financial

solutions, it requires a deliberate reshaping of internal beliefs and external systems that influence human behavior across generations. Table 1 outlines the preliminary thematic outcomes of the category selection.

Table 1: Initial Data categorization

Category	Primary Conditioning	Secondary Conditioning	Delayed Gratification
1. Born Poor and Continue in Poverty	Characterized by internalized helplessness, emotional exhaustion, and self-image rooted in inferiority. Averse to discomfort and risk, they often prioritize short-term relief over long-term planning. E.g., <i>"Whatever I earn, I don't save it for life. I just pass the time."</i> (BPCP1)	Influenced by cultural fatalism, learned dependence on aid, and ideological narratives that blame systemic oppression, reinforcing passivity. E.g., <i>"We don't even get any relief. We are very helpless."</i> (BPCP2)	Weak. Daily spending on immediate pleasures (e.g., alcohol) reflects inability to defer gratification. E.g., <i>"I spend about 500 rupees on drinks arrack in the evening."</i> (BPCP4)
2. Born Poor but Escaped Poverty	Driven by a strong desire to change their identity and escape poverty. They display emotional resilience and belief in self-determination. E.g., <i>"You have to have a great desire to get rich... You become poor because of your own will."</i> (BPEP2)	Benefited from mentors, education, or spiritual values fostering hope and responsibility. E.g., <i>"I am a very organized planner... As a Buddhist, I have built a very good relationship with the temple."</i> (BPEP 3)	Strong. Demonstrated ability to endure present hardship for future rewards. E.g., <i>"I spend 10 rupees and save 90 rupees. Only then can we develop."</i> (BPEP5)
3. Born Rich and Continue to Be Rich	Shaped by disciplined mindsets, work ethic, and low aversion to effort or risk. Strong self-regulation supports sustainable success. E.g., <i>"I am in this situation today because of very good money management and good financial investments."</i> (BRCR1)	Secondary conditioning through structured family values, long-term planning, and social responsibility. E.g., <i>"My father also ran those businesses well and now he has handed them over to me."</i> (BRCR1)	Strong. Future-oriented behavior and ethical grounding. E.g., <i>"I work for long-term happiness rather than short-term happiness."</i> (BRCR3)
4. Born Rich but Failed to Sustain Wealth	Dominated by indulgence, avoidance of discomfort, and inflated ego tied to past wealth. Lacks internal accountability and adaptability. E.g., <i>"We have land but no idea how to use it well. We just enjoy it."</i> (BRFR1)	Reinforced by materialistic environments and peer cultures focused on status over substance. Lacks value-based education or role models for resilience.	Weak. Decisions driven by pleasure and prestige, lacking foresight or control. E.g., frequent overspending and poor investments.

The discussion below further explains the findings of the survey in relation to the four categories.

Category 1: Born Poor and Continue in Poverty

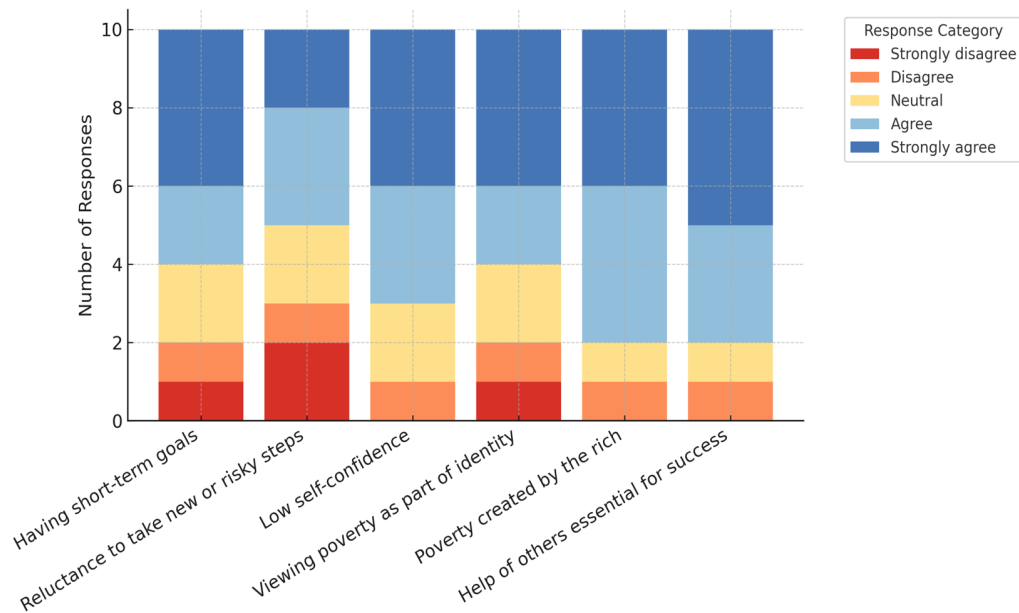
Participants in this group often exhibited primary conditioning that prioritized immediate comfort over long-term aspirations. They showed low tolerance for discomfort and a self-image rooted in inferiority and helplessness. As one respondent expressed:

"I just want some peace and support... I can't think beyond today." (BPCP1)

Their secondary conditioning was shaped by beliefs that blame the wealthy for their situation, fostering passivity and reliance on external help. This created a "psychological ceiling," with one participant stating:

"Politicians should fix this... there's nothing people like us can do." (BPCP2)

Figure 1 visually supports these findings, showing mixed opinions on "poor due to own actions" and relatively low belief in school/family support, indicating a lack of agency and support networks.

Figure 1: Attitudes of individuals in Category 1

The findings of our study suggest that individuals who were born into poverty and continue to remain poor often do so due to both primary and secondary conditioning. In terms of primary conditioning, a deep desire for immediate relief, comfort, support, and security tends to override long-term aspirations. These individuals often exhibit an aversion to discomfort, effort, and uncertainty, which limits their willingness to take proactive steps toward change. Their self-image, rooted in feelings of helplessness and inferiority, perpetuates a cycle of inaction. Furthermore, their thinking tends to be self-centered and focused on personal survival, which inhibits consideration of long-term or collective well-being. Ego-identification with poverty reinforces a victim identity, further discouraging the possibility of self-transformation. It was observed that their living conditions, including their homes and land, were in disarray and poorly maintained. In terms of secondary conditioning, many believe that the wealthy are solely responsible for their condition, which discourages personal responsibility and action. A habitual dependence on external agencies, such as politicians or aid organizations, fosters passivity. Deeply ingrained beliefs in their own powerlessness create a psychological ceiling, while political ideologies that emphasize systemic exploitation over personal agency contribute to a pervasive sense of fatalism.

Category 2: Born Poor but Escaped Poverty

This group was marked by strong intrinsic motivation and a rejection of poverty identity. A common theme was sacrificing present comfort for future success, as one individual noted:

"I hated being poor. I studied when others slept." (BPEP1)

However, after achieving success, many adopted individualistic attitudes:

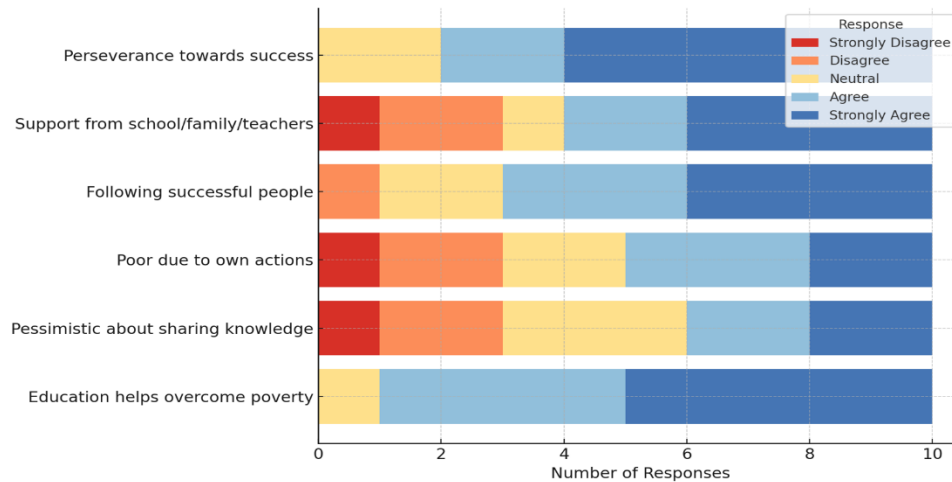
"If I made it, so can they. Why help those who won't try?" (BPEP2)

This often translates into status-oriented giving rather than poverty alleviation, thereby reinforcing existing inequalities.

Secondary conditioning in this group included exposure to empowering role models and education. Yet, some expressed distancing attitudes:

"We shouldn't mix too much with the poor, it affects our image." (BPEP 4)

Overall, Figure 2 suggests a positive outlook on education and perseverance, but also mixed or contested views on the causes of poverty and the role of social support. This reflects the complex interplay between structural factors and personal responsibility in shaping people's beliefs about poverty and success.

Figure 2: Attitudes of individuals in category 2

Those who were born poor but successfully escaped poverty show contrasting patterns of conditioning. Their primary conditioning includes a strong desire to experience the wealth and comforts enjoyed by the affluent. This desire is often powerful enough to motivate the sacrifice of present comforts for a better future. A rejection of the inherited poverty identity is common among them. However, after escaping poverty, some adopt behaviors that inadvertently reinforce inequality. For example, they may make status-enhancing donations rather than poverty-reducing ones, and may believe that if they were able to rise out of poverty through hard work, others should be able to do the same, an attitude that often leads to a lack of empathy or support for those still struggling. Their homes were grandiose and identified as status symbols. From a secondary conditioning perspective, these individuals often benefit from exposure to empowering beliefs through mentors, teachers, or spiritual practices that counter disempowering narratives. Supportive family or social influences encourage risk-taking and growth, while role models and success stories expand their sense of what is possible. Education and alternative narratives challenge fatalism and promote self-agency. However, their belief that the poor are simply lazy and undeserving of help, along with their tendency to maintain social distance from them, further sustains inequality.

Category 3: Born Rich and Continues to Be Rich

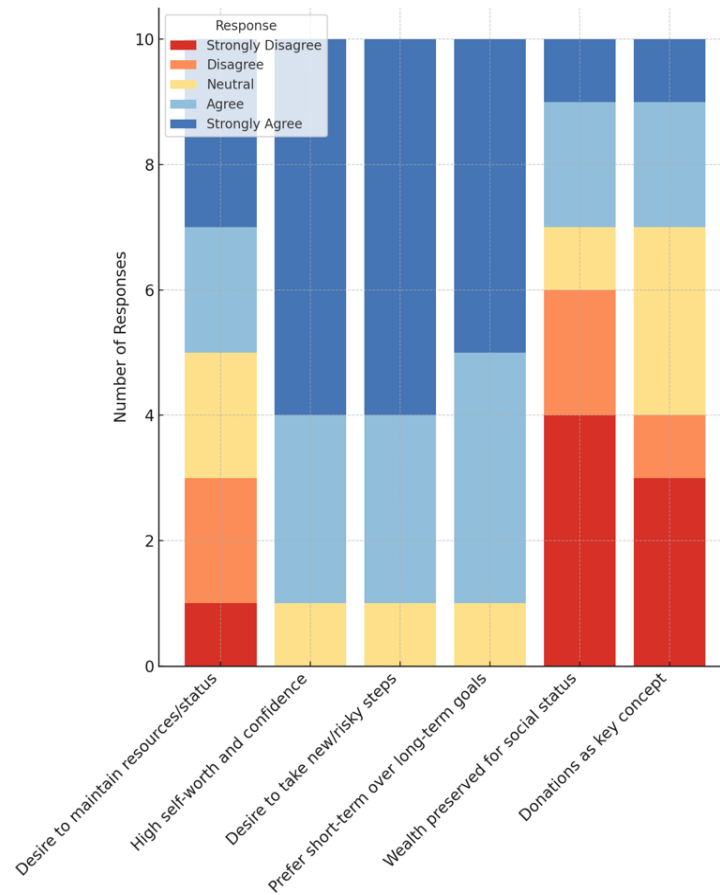
The success of this group was tied to early conditioning that emphasized responsibility, effort, and financial discipline. These individuals were taught to invest long-term and maintain social position.

"We were taught that money isn't just to spend, it's to grow." (BRCR 2)

However, this also led to status-preserving behavior over altruism:

"Charity is fine, but we support causes that align with our brand." (BRCR8)

Figure 3 displays participants' attitudes toward wealth-related motivations and behaviors, categorized across seven key statements. The responses show strong agreement with statements such as "Desire to maintain resources/status", "High self-worth and confidence", "Desire to take new/risky steps", and "Prefer short-term over long-term goals", indicating a proactive and status-conscious mindset among many respondents. Conversely, statements like "Wealth preserved for social status" and "Donations as key concept" received more disagreement and neutrality, suggesting ambivalence or resistance toward wealth being used for social posturing or altruistic giving. This reflects a nuanced view where personal growth and ambition are prioritized over symbolic or redistributive uses of wealth.

Figure 3: Attitudes of individuals in category 2

Those born into wealth and who manage to retain it typically show a desire to maintain both their financial status and social standing. Their low aversion to effort and risk enables long-term investment and responsible decision-making. However, this same desire to preserve their social status and income gap often translates into status-enhancing donations rather than those that would reduce poverty, indirectly contributing to inequality. Their secondary conditioning includes an upbringing that instills resilience, care, and a sense of responsibility. Family traditions and values emphasize delayed gratification, ethical conduct, and financial prudence. Education and positive role modeling instill financial literacy and long-term planning skills, while societal expectations regarding wealth and contribution help reinforce responsible behavior and sustained growth.

Category 4 Born Rich but Failed to Sustain Wealth

Individuals born into wealth but unable to maintain it often exhibit primary conditioning characterized by excessive desires for pleasure, luxury, or recognition, resulting in unsustainable lifestyle choices. Their aversion to discomfort and responsibility results in avoidance behavior and poor decision-making. A rigid or inflated ego identity tied to wealth can impair adaptability and learning, while an attachment to a past self-concept can prevent individuals from accepting and responding to current realities. Their self-centered thinking often damages relationships and erodes support networks. In terms of secondary conditioning, an entitled upbringing or overindulgence can weaken discipline and a sense of accountability. The absence of moral or spiritual grounding can encourage hedonism and recklessness, while exposure to materialistic, status-driven values may lead them to prioritize appearance over substance. Additionally, family or peer expectations that discourage responsibility or learning from failure can further undermine their ability to sustain wealth.

Table 2 outlines the main themes across the four categories, which draws on both primary and secondary conditioning factors. The findings highlight recurring patterns in psychological, motivational, social, and structural aspects. The

themes identified, spanning self-perception, motivation, agency, social orientation, and structural conditioning, reveal how deeply embedded belief systems and environmental influences can either reinforce cycles of poverty or support pathways to prosperity.

Table 2: Key themes of the four categories

Theme	Category 1	Category 2	Category 3	Category 4
Identity & Self-Perception	Victim identity	Transformed identity	Stable ego-identity	Inflated ego
Motivation & Desire	Short-term comfort	Long-term aspiration	Preservation of status	Indulgence-driven
Responsibility & Agency	External blame, passivity	High personal agency	Disciplined agency	Avoidance, irresponsibility
Social Orientation & Empathy	Self-focused survival	Decline in empathy	Inequality-sustaining status focus	Exploitation, distrust
Structural Conditioning	Disempowering narratives	Empowering networks	Traditional moral grounding	Lack of discipline, materialism

These themes provide insight into how internal conditioning, emotional drivers, self-concept, and values shape individuals' socio-economic outcomes. A core theme among those who remained poor was immediate gratification and survival-focused identity, often coupled with helplessness and external blame. Their emotional landscape was marked by a desire for comfort, avoidance of risk, and limited forward planning. This contrasts sharply with participants who escaped poverty, whose narratives revealed themes of strong future orientation, personal agency, and resistance to inherited poverty identity. These individuals frequently expressed an internal drive for transformation and were often supported by empowering social influences, such as spiritual teachings or mentors.

Participants who were born rich and remain wealthy exhibited themes of self-regulation, disciplined upbringing, and ethical orientation toward wealth, with emotional maturity and responsibility playing significant roles. Their ability to sustain wealth appeared to stem not only from resources but from values that promoted delayed gratification, long-term planning, and contribution. In contrast, those born into wealth but failed to sustain it were characterized by themes of entitlement, avoidance of responsibility, and emotional impulsiveness. Their conditioning fostered a fragile ego tied to status rather than substance, and their emotional decision-making often led to decline.

Across all categories, the presence or absence of delayed gratification, the strength of self-identity, and the nature of emotional conditioning emerged as critical differentiators. These themes reinforce the study's broader claim that poverty and inequality are not solely material issues but are deeply linked to internal psychological structures and socio-cultural conditioning.

As already discussed, spiritual development involves an inner transformation, from a mind driven by past conditioning (i.e., desires, aversions, and the sense of self, collectively referred to as the conditioned mind or psyche) to a mind that is free from such conditioning (i.e., the unconditioned or pristine mind, also referred to as the Human Spirit). In this unconditioned state, the self-other division dissolves, and one becomes sensitive to the present moment, able to respond positively to the needs of oneself, others, and nature spontaneously. This responsiveness is what we refer to as living in the present moment. Our study reveals that the minds of all interviewees, both wealthy and poor, are primarily driven by the conditioned mind: by desires, aversions, and the sense of self, and secondarily by attachment to beliefs, ideologies, attitudes, and values. Consequently, their minds remain spiritually underdeveloped.

However, we observed a distinction among interviewees: while some demonstrate the capacity to postpone the gratification of desires, aversions, and egoic impulses in favor of greater material rewards in the future, others do not possess this capacity and instead seek immediate gratification. For instance, those who possess this capacity wake very early in the morning and start working, consume little and save for the future, sacrifice their present comforts and invest in their children's education for a better future. In contrast, those who do not possess such capacity tend to prioritize present consumption rather than postponing it in favor of a better future. Such people show the habit of oversleeping, avoiding hardship, spending their meagre earnings for immediate gratification, i.e., drinking alcohol, gambling, etc., not investing in or encouraging their children's education.

This behavioral difference aligns with the theory of delayed gratification by Mischel [33] by Mischel, Ebbesen, & Zeies,[34]. The theory posits that individuals who are able to postpone immediate rewards in favor of greater future gains are more likely to succeed in life, including in their efforts to escape poverty. The findings show that among the poor, those who possess this capacity are more likely to escape poverty, while those who do not remain trapped in it. Among the wealthy, those with this capacity tend to sustain or increase their wealth, while those without it often fail to maintain their inherited wealth and experience relative decline.

However, a deeper understanding requires examining the underlying mental conditioning, both primary and secondary that influences these divergent outcomes. Our interviews with individuals who were born poor but escaped poverty, as well as those born wealthy who have remained so, reveal that their desire for greater future gratification (a product of primary conditioning) reinforced by their beliefs, values, ideologies, and attitudes (secondary conditioning), is strong enough to override their aversion to present hardships such as the drudgery of work or the risks and uncertainties of unfamiliar entrepreneurial ventures. Conversely, our interviews with individuals who were born poor and remain in poverty, and those born wealthy who have lost their wealth, reveal that their aversion to present hardships, such as waking early, taking risks, or delaying consumption for future gain (primary conditioning)—reinforced by supporting beliefs, values, ideologies, and attitudes (secondary conditioning), is strong enough to override their desire for long-term gratification.

Despite their ability to delay gratification and achieve material success, these individuals' minds remain driven by conditioned desires, aversions, and the sense of self. As a result, they remain spiritually underdeveloped. Our interviews with them have revealed that they are unable to fully experience the intrinsic qualities of the pristine state of mind, such as inner peace and genuine happiness. They continue to heavily depend on external sources for fulfillment, such as accumulating material wealth, seeking recognition and respect from society, striving to elevate themselves above others, and seeking entertainment. Their pursuit of external happiness drives them to act primarily for their success and wellbeing, often at the expense of the wellbeing of others and nature, thereby contributing to social conflict, inequality, unhappiness, and unsustainability.

Our evidence reveals that those who were born poor but have escaped poverty and those who were born wealthy and still remain wealthy continue to act in self-interested ways. While some of them generously donate a portion of their wealth, their motivations are often tied to enhancing their self-image, reputation and social status. For instance, they donate to many good causes such as building schools, temples, and helping with religious rituals and functions, but the facts revealed in interviews show that their hidden motives are for self-enhancement rather than the common good. Moreover, their attitudes toward the poor tend to be negative and are not conducive to reducing poverty and inequality. For instance, there is a general belief among those born poor but escaped poverty that "I worked hard and sacrificed a lot to rise above poverty. Why can't they do the same?", "they remain poor because they are lazy. Such people don't deserve help". Most born wealthy and continue to be wealthy often share these beliefs. Apart from that, some of them believe that they have inherited wealth and become wealthy because of the 'good karma' they have performed in their previous lives and the poor are poor because they haven't done such good karma in their previous lives. They receive what they deserve. Such conditioning contributes to sustaining inequality. Thus, though the delayed gratification theory offers some insight into individual success or failure, it cannot explain why poverty reduction through external interventions often fails to reduce inequality.

In contrast, our theory of mental conditioning provides a more comprehensive explanation for this phenomenon. Even those who escape poverty or retain wealth are often driven by desires, aversions, and a strong sense of self, marked by a self-other divide that fuels self-centeredness. As a result, their actions, whether intentional or unconscious, tend to serve their own interests, enhancing personal wealth, power, social status, or recognition, often at the expense of others' well-being, quality of life, and happiness. This inner psychological divide between the wealthy and the poor persists, perpetuating inequality. Therefore, inequality continues to exist, even if some individuals escape poverty, as long as the minds of both the wealthy and the poor remain conditioned and do not undergo spiritual growth or inner transformation by freeing their mind from conditioning.

We argue that the capacity to postpone gratification shows, to some extent, one's capacity to free one's mind from conditioning and grow spiritually. Growing spiritually means, as previously discussed, freeing the mind from conditioning and reconnecting with the pristine mind, also known as the Human Spirit. The conditioned mind is habituated to seek immediate gratification, indulging in what gives pleasure and avoiding what gives discomfort or pain; therefore, it becomes aversive when interacting with the external world. To transcend these conditioned mental habits, the mind must be trained to remain calm and non-reactive, neither automatically indulging in what is pleasurable nor is impulsively avoiding what aversive. This can also involve intentionally reducing desires and

aversions by, for example, refraining from pursuing what brings pleasure (but is harmful to the well-being of the whole) and learning to accept or even find value in what brings discomfort or pain (but is beneficial to the well-being of the whole). An individual who possesses the capacity to postpone gratification may find it relatively easier to train their mind in this way and thereby begin to transcend desires and aversions.

Therefore, it can be argued that those who possess the capacity to postpone gratification are better equipped to progress on the spiritual path. Their capacity to postpone gratification indicates that they may be one step ahead in their spiritual journey. With appropriate guidance, they may be better positioned to free their mind from conditioning and move toward genuine spiritual growth. However, it is essential to distinguish between postponing gratification for the sake of greater external rewards, such as wealth, recognition, or success, and transcending gratification altogether in pursuit of inner peace and freedom in the pristine state of mind. While conditioned desires still drive the former, the latter reflects a deeper inner transformation. Nevertheless, the ability to delay gratification can be seen as a potential stepping stone toward spiritual growth, especially when directed inward to transcend the conditioned impulses of the mind.

Most theories of poverty and inequality share a common oversight: they assume that the conditioned human mind is normal, natural, and essentially unchangeable. This assumption restricts theoretical and practical responses to poverty and inequality to external mechanisms. This section explores how freeing the minds of both the poor and the wealthy from conditioning could effectively reduce poverty and inequality. When individuals, both wealthy and poor, free their minds from conditioning, it reduces the power of desires, aversions, and self-centeredness to influence their thoughts and actions, resulting in an enhanced ability for the pristine state of mind to guide thoughts and actions spontaneously. This results in connection with one's authentic self, a natural sense of oneness with others and nature, and spontaneous empathy toward all beings. This inner transformation in both wealthy and poor individuals could contribute to the reduction of poverty and inequality, as well as sustainability in the following ways. Once the wealthy free their minds from conditioning, their actions shift from self-centered accumulation to whole-centered well-being, allowing them to give way to sharing. They begin to view wealth as a means for collective welfare rather than a means for self-glorification. Their business practices prioritize fair wages and social responsibility. Their inner tendency to shift from social division to inclusivity leads to the dissolution of barriers based on class, race, and status, providing equal opportunities. They become less interested in enhancing their recognition and power results in a shift from philanthropy to empowerment. Instead of donating to short-term charity, they become more interested in empowering the poor.

On the other hand, freeing the mind from conditioning fosters self-empowerment and breaks cycles of helplessness. Instead of attributing poverty to external forces and blaming the wealthy, the existing system, and the government, they take active steps toward self-improvement. Freeing the mind from conditioning leads to increased self-confidence, which in turn fosters education, skill development, and innovation. They also shift from short-term gratification to purposeful action. Their focus shifts from momentary relief to long-term stability. Their mind freed from conditioning enable them to dissolve the resentment towards the wealthy and collaborate with them for the benefit of both parties, which fosters sustainable progress. When both wealthy and poor individuals operate from a whole-centered rather than a self-centered mindset, a fair distribution of resources emerges naturally, the conflicts arising from status and wealth disparities dissolve, shared responsibility of nature leads to balanced resource use and environmental sustainability, and human relationships begin to be driven by compassion rather than competition. This shift naturally reduces poverty and inequality, not solely through external policies, but through a transformation in human consciousness that shapes all actions, relationships, and societal structures.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Mind consists of two components: the pristine mind or unconditioned mind, and the conditioned mind or Psyche. The pristine state of mind represents the original state of mind where there is no self-other division but Oneness. This is Spirit. But the Spirit is overshadowed by the conditioned mind (Psyche); therefore, thoughts and actions are driven by the conditioned mind. Freeing the mind from conditioning aligns our thoughts and actions with the Spirit. In other words, it makes us spiritual. This alignment fosters a sense of connectedness with oneself, others, and nature, leading to whole-centeredness. Feeling connected with the whole self, others, and nature enhances our capacity to love, cooperate, collaborate, share, and live in harmony. The whole-centeredness, in turn, inspires us to work hard for the well-being of the whole and to share the resulting benefits with ourselves, others, and nature. This leads to sustainability, understood as the ability to meet the needs of individuals, societies, and countries without compromising the ability of other individuals, societies, countries, and future generations, and to live happily. Conversely, when the mind remains conditioned, we feel disconnected from ourselves, others, and nature, which results in self-centeredness.

The study's insights suggest that effective poverty reduction strategies must extend beyond economic interventions and incorporate inner transformation as a critical component:

- Integrating mindset and emotional resilience training into poverty alleviation programs, particularly those targeting youth and underserved communities. Building self-awareness, while highlighting the dangers of self-centeredness, goal-setting skills, and the capacity for delayed gratification, can help individuals develop greater agency over their future.
- Designing community-based mentoring and role model initiatives, especially among those who have successfully transitioned out of poverty. Personal stories of transformation can counter fatalistic beliefs and inspire new possibilities.
- Promoting spiritually grounded or ethically oriented education, which reinforces intrinsic values such as patience, responsibility, and long-term vision, especially in wealthier groups at risk of entitlement or decline.
- Encouraging cross-class dialogues to break down stereotypes and build empathy, particularly among affluent individuals who may view poverty through a lens of personal failure. Reframing wealth as a responsibility rather than a reward can shift charitable behavior from status-enhancing to transformative giving.
- Policy-level engagement to support integrated social development models that combine economic empowerment with psychological well-being, especially in national poverty reduction frameworks.

In essence, tackling poverty and inequality requires cultivating a deeper understanding of the mind and its conditioning. Without addressing the inner roots of behavior, even the best-designed external interventions risk being temporary or ineffective. Sustainable development must therefore include not only structural change but psychological liberation, empowering individuals to transcend limiting narratives and actualize their fullest potential.

The self-centered mind is primarily driven by the desire for pleasure and comfort, the avoidance of pain and discomfort, and the need to defend one's self-image or ego. While the desire for pleasure can motivate individuals to work hard to increase their capacity for enjoyment and ego gratification, it simultaneously diminishes their capacity to love, cooperate, collaborate, and share. This diminished capacity contributes to social and economic inequality, as well as personal and collective unhappiness. Furthermore, the lack of love and cooperation reduces the ability to perform one's work with peace, fulfillment, and success, thereby increasing the risk of stress, anxiety, depression, and unhappiness. As a result, while such desire-driven effort may lead to economic growth, it also produces inequality and unhappiness, ultimately leading to unsustainability. The findings of this study suggest that being driven by desire can help individuals escape poverty, but the same desires undermine their capacity to love and share, thereby contributing to inequality. These findings support the argument that integrating spirituality into poverty alleviation strategies can help reduce both poverty and inequality, thereby promoting sustainability.

Local religious centers such as temples, mosques, and churches wield significant power and influence over both wealthy and impoverished families in their communities. They are well-positioned to bridge the psychological gap between the poor and wealthy. Yet, this power and influence are often underutilized in efforts to reduce poverty and inequality. Some key limitations identified are (a) local religious centers often prioritize the propagation and preservation of their specific doctrines over facilitating deep personal transformation, (b) religious centers frequently emphasize the importance of maintaining religious and cultural identities, which can further entrench mental conditioning rather than dissolve it, (c) many leaders of religious centers lack necessary training in psychology, psychotherapy, counselling and science-based modern spiritual practices that are critical for guiding individuals toward freedom from conditioning, (d) local religious centers often engage in competition and comparison with one another, focusing on their material growth and influence rather than spiritual growth and (e) for religious centers to help their followers achieve freedom from conditioning, their leaders must first attain this state themselves. However, many leaders remain bound by their own mental conditioning.

Transitioning from a focus on religiousness to spirituality presents challenges. Many religious leaders may need to undergo their own spiritual transformation to lead by example. Communities steeped in traditional practices may resist change, perceiving it as a threat to their cultural identity. These challenges can be addressed through education, dialogue, and leadership that bridges the gap between traditional religious practices and universal spiritual values.

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