

Politics of Poverty

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In the year 2000, the village Pitanau of the Gopiballavpur area of the district of West Medinipore, West Bengal witnessed an animated discussion over the new BPL (below poverty line) list prepared by the local Block Development Office. The names of fifty tribal families of the village had been on the list prepared in 1993. But now it was revealed that the new list has excluded them all. The people rushed to the local *panchayet* office, but the latter only pleaded ignorance. A large number of people went to the Block Development Office, and were informed that the new BPL list had been prepared according to the instructions given by the government. They were further told that anybody was entitled to file a written objection, but the Government had instructed that the new list must not be extended by more than 10 percent. In the entire block area, 57% of the population had been included in the BPL list of 1993. But this proportion was now reduced to only 30%. The condition of the neighbouring Sankrail block was worse with only 18% of the people figuring on the list.

The debate on the correct BPL list has eluded any solution over the last five years. People are unable to understand the criteria for qualifying as poor. In this period of New Economic Policy, official expenditure on rural development has been reduced; there has been a relative stagnation in agricultural production and a decline in availability of food grains per capita and provision of rural employment. The indebtedness of the peasantry has been rising, and suicide and starvation deaths are too frequent to ignore. Yet the Planning Commission is claiming that the reforms programme has led to a reduction in poverty. The West Bengal Government too has been making a similar claim. So, it is necessary to examine the criteria that have been used for the measurement of poverty.

It goes without saying that there is no absolute measuring rod of poverty. There has been a lot of theoretical discussion on the point. For a relatively poor and underdeveloped country of India, availability of the basic needs like food, shelter, education and health feature prominently in the measurement. The most basic requirement is, of course, food. Hence when the poverty line was first constructed in India, the yardstick of food and nutrition was given foremost priority.

In 1973-74, persons living in rural areas and getting less than 2004 calories a day per capita were designated as poor, the corresponding nutritional requirement in urban areas was 2100 calories. These were of course average estimate. This was followed by estimates of monthly per capita consumer expenditure using the data of the 28th round of National Sample Survey. At 1973-74 prices, this amounted to 49.09 rupees in rural and 56.64 rupees in urban areas. Subsequently, the Planning Commission replaced this method with an indirect one. In this new method, estimates are taken of the rise in the prices of the commodities consumed by the poor. It is curious that such estimates do not contain any specific reference to the calorie requirements and the necessary expenditure for them.

In a recent article (vide, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 28 July-3 August, 2007), Professor Utsa Pattanaik has presented two tables based on the data

provided by the 55th round of the National Sample Survey. From these tables, three interrelated pieces of information are obtained :

- (1) Those who spend 470-525 rupees per month per capita on food receive 2289 calories on the average.
- (2) For 2400 calories, the monthly per capita expenditure on food should be between 525 and 615 rupees or 567 rupees on the average.
- (3) Those who cannot afford this per capita monthly expenditure of 567 rupees constitute 80% of total population.

In 1999-2000, the Planning Commission fixed monthly per capita expenditure on food of Rs 327.56 as the dividing line. From the data compiled by Pattanaik, it is found that such expenditure yields about 1890 calories, i.e. about 500 calories less than the minimum nutritional requirement. The indirect method of measurement employed by the Planning Commission has succeeded in artificially reducing the amount of calories required for maintaining the people at the minimum desirable nutritional level.

What stands out is that there is much deception in the estimates of poverty presented by the Planning Commission. As a matter of fact, the proportion of people below the poverty line has been going up, if the yardstick of 1973-74 is adopted for measurement.

The report of the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganized Sector corroborates this view. According to this report, the number of persons spending less than 20 rupees per day went up from 732 millions in 1993-94 to 834 millions in 2004-05. The report says nothing about the calories obtained by these people, but characterizes them as "poor and vulnerable". The report has categorically argued that a rise in national income through the operation of the market would not automatically improve the condition of these sections of the people.

What is clear is that by leaving aside the earlier method and adopting a new one, the Planning Commission has artificially lowered the poverty line and hypocritically tried to glorify the new economic policy. The position of the World Bank is not dissimilar. The World Development report 2006 says that the proportion of living below the poverty line in the rural areas is 30.2%. Thus both the World Bank and the Planning Commission have shared the common motive of deceiving the Indian people as far as the much-publicized task of eliminating poverty is concerned.

WEST BENGAL SCENARIO

West Bengal is a case deserving particular attention because here a supposedly leftist government committed to the cause of the poor has been at the helm of affairs for three decades. In 1999-2000, the Planning Commission adjudged the people spending less than 328 rupees per month as poor and calculated that the proportion of people living below the poverty line in rural areas was 27.4%. All state governments were asked to revise the BPL lists accordingly. The Government of West Bengal saw that the proportion could not be kept at so low a level if the nutritional requirement was pegged at 2400 calories. Hence it meekly complied with the 12-point guideline suggested by the Planning Commission. These twelve points include effective landholding, the nature and type of residence, the number of clothes per member, possession of consumer goods,

educational level, the means of livelihood etc, but there is no reference to the nutritional level. In fact, if a family can afford two meals a day, it can qualify as above the BPL benchmark although it cannot afford the nutritional requirement, because what he consumes at his lunch and dinner is out of consideration. It goes without saying that the state government has also adopted the faulty technique suggested by the Planning Commission in order to deceive the poor of the state.

The method of preparing the BPL lists was a bureaucratic one. The District Magistrates and the Block Development Officers were instructed to keep their respective BPL lists within the limits of 27%, and the task of identifying the poor was allotted to the lower-level employees of the state government. It is curious that all the layers of the *panchayets* were carefully excluded from the process of identifying the poor, although by the 73rd-74th amendments of the constitution, the issue of removal of poverty lay within the power of *gram samsads*, the lowest *panchayet* body. It is funny as well as fraudulent because the CPI(M) leaders have been claiming for years that they had effected a decentralization of power through *panchyets*. The BPL lists prepared in 2002 were accordingly disastrous. Many *gram panchayets* did not display these lists for fear of incurring popular wrath, and grievances came out in the open. Finally, the Minister of *Panchayets* ordered a revision saying that the lists can be extended by 10%. But since the error lies at the root, confusion and trouble continue. The upshot is that the state government has not yet been able to finalize the number and names of the poor. Talks of 'development' and 'industrialization' are poor substitutes for this failure.

While preparing the BPL lists, the State Government has committed three offences. The first is to separate poverty from nutritional requirement. The second is to meekly accept as the basis the Planning Commission's fraudulent estimate of 27.3% and to prepare its own estimates accordingly. The third, which is most important, is to exclude the *panchyets* from the work of identifying the poor and instead rely on government employees. This is simply a mockery of decentralization of power through *panchayets*. The Government should have kept the yardstick of 2400 calories in rural areas and 2100 calories in urban areas and to ascertain the limit of expenditure through the direct method, and to call meetings of *gram samsads* for preparing BPL lists! These lists were likely to be the most accurate ones.

The State Government argues that it is very difficult to estimate the monthly expenditure of a family, while it is much easier to ascertain whether it has a bicycle or not. The issue of nutritional yardstick is lost here. This argument is a specious one. The Government has the data regarding wage employment in a block, as well the average wage level. It is not at all difficult to calculate the income from land. It is also easy to find out the salaries of service-holders. Finally, there is no significant difference between the income and expenditure of the rural poor. In short, whatever the protestations of the State Government, it has accepted entirely the neo-liberal economics and has dedicated itself to the task widening the rich poor divide. Thus it finds itself on the same wave length as the central Government and the World Bank. In fact the policy of preparing the BPL lists shows glaringly that the ruling left front of West Bengal is a faithful hand of what is called 'imperialist globalization'. Only a united struggle for changing the method of measurement, giving due consideration to the nutritional

requirement, and assigning the task of preparing the BPL lists to *gram samsads* in rural and ward committees in urban areas can force the government to change its position. □□□