

'Philosophy of Poverty'

HOW TO DEFINE POVERTY IS A tricky question. What is shown as India's poverty line is actually a starvation line. Then in official press release no Indian dies of starvation. Maybe malnutrition is the cause. Politics of poverty is a nice gambit all political indulge in.

The number of poor is multiplying at a time when the number of billionaires has also increased. Economic growth however does not reflect the widening economic disparities. For instance, the economic wealth of mere 30-odd rich families in India is equivalent to one third of the country's growth. The more the wealth accumulating in the hands of these 30 families, the more will be country's economic growth. A handful of rich therefore hide the ugly face of growing poverty.

If these 30 families were to migrate to America and Europe, India's GDP, which stands at 7.9 percent at present, will slump to 6 percent. And if the economic growth resulting from the 6th pay commission is counted, which is 1.9 percent of the GDP, India's actual economic growth will slump to just 4 percent.

Anyway, the complicated arith-metic conceals more than what it reveals. Poverty estimates were earlier based on nutritional criteria, which means based on the monthly income required to purchase 2,100 calories in the urban areas and 2,400 calories in the rural areas. Over the years, this measure came in for sharp criticism, and finally the Planning Commission suggested a new estimation methodology based on a new basket of goods that is required to survive—includes food, fuel, light, clothing and footwear.

Accordingly, the Suresh Tendulkar Committee has worked out that 41.8 percent of the population or approximately 450 million people survive on a monthly per capita consumption expenditure of Rs 447. In other words, daily expenditure for these people comes to bare Rs 14.50 paise. How can the rural population earning more than Rs 14 and less than say even Rs 25 a day be expected to be over the poverty line? It is quite obvious therefore that the entire effort is still to downplay the poverty level under a veil of complicating figures.

The poverty line that is laid out actually becomes the upper limit the government must pledge to feed. People living below this line constitute the Below the Poverty Line (BPL) category, for which the government has to provide a legal guarantee to provide food. More the poverty line more is the food subsidy.

If the government accepts Tendulkar Committee report, the food subsidy bill will swell to Rs 47,917.62-crore, a steep rise over the earlier subsidy of Rs 28,890.56-crore required to feed the BPL population with 25 kg of grains. This is primarily the reason why the government wants to keep the number of poor low. In reality, the poverty line reflects the number of people living in acute hunger.

Going back to the poverty line arithmetic, the 2007 Arjun Sengupta committee report (officially the report of the National Commission on Enterprise in Unorganised Sector), which had estimated that 77 per cent of the population or 836 million people, were unable to spend more than Rs 20 a day, is probably a correct reflection of the extent of prevailing poverty.

In addition to monthly income, poverty estimates must incorporate the human development index as prepared by the United Nations Development Programme.

Poverty alleviation schemes have so far failed to eradicate poverty. One reason such a huge hungry population is being forced to groan under chronic poverty is to crush them morally and physically before they take the agitational paths for sheer survival. After all famine didn't produce any revolution. □□□