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Calorie intake criterion puts 50 per cent Indians below poverty line

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An expert committee, set up by the Rural Development Ministry and headed by N.C. Saxena, says 50 per cent of Indians are Below the Poverty Line if one takes into account the criterion of calorie intake.

This nearly doubles the BPL numbers, when the Planning Commission has said only 28.3 per cent of the population is BPL. If accepted, this will bring a much larger number of the poor under the system of food subsidy.

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MISSING OUT MILLIONS: India's flawed methodology of defining the poor has meant that millions are excluded from official statistics. A new report recommends parameters for "automatic inclusion" and "automatic exclusion" for some categories of households. File photo: M.A. Srinam

The Hindu

macro economics The report now circulated to States for comments before undertaking a BPL survey, makes a stark indictment of the existing food subsidy system.

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"The number of food deficit people is at least double the number officially declared poor in India. Thus there is every case for enlarging the category of those entitled to cheaper food from the government," it says.

Calorie intake decline

The report demonstrates that there has been a steady

decline in the calorie intake, especially cereal consumption, among the poor between 1972-73 and 1999-2000. Ironically this has happened even as the number of people officially declared poor has steadily gone down over the same years.

The report maps "gross errors of exclusion and inclusion" that have crept into the system because of the flawed methodology of BPL identification, and argues that "errors of inclusion are far better than the errors of exclusions which often crop up in the backward districts as the poor people, especially tribals, have little voice or influence over the administration."

It says that 61 per cent of households, poor on account of their consumption expenditure being less than the official poverty line, have been excluded from the net of BPL census.

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It recommends a new methodology of score-based ranking, besides recommending parameters for “automatic inclusion” and “automatic exclusion” for some categories of households. It has said that families with double the land of the district average of agricultural land and other criteria could be excluded from survey, while families being designated a primitive tribe, dalit, homeless household or minorities be included automatically.

Voices of dissent

The report also records comments by members who disagree with its orientation.

P. Sainath, member, argues against the system of targeted welfare schemes for food, health care, education and decent work. He points out that Public Distribution System (PDS) has worked best when it “has been for decades closer to universal [such as in Kerala and Tamil Nadu].” He argues that targeted systems “are very expensive and call for a huge and expensive apparatus that invites corruption and black-marketing.”

On the other hand, member-convenor K.L. Das has said that determining the poverty ratio is beyond the terms of reference of the expert group since “it is to be decided by the Planning Commission and not Ministry of Rural Development.”

Survey

The committee has recommended that a survey of BPL rural families be undertaken between August 2009 and January 2010 as work on Census 2011 is to start from next year, requiring huge numbers of field staff.

Full text of the report can be accessed on www.rural.nic.in

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