

Calcutta Notebook

MSPVT

FIGURES ARE FOR FUN! AND this fun is nowhere so attractive as in the Planning Commission's statistical jugglery, particularly in defining poverty. Some time in September, 2011, the Supreme Court of India brewed a storm in the tea cup by questioning the accuracy of the Planning Commission's drawing the poverty line on the basis of ability to spend Rs 32 a day in urban areas and Rs 26 a day in rural areas for an adult in the family. Along with the Court's doubt, people also rubbished the Planning Commission's wisdom although some feeble pieces of rationalization of the Planning body's point of view appeared in the print media. Now about six months after that 'storm', a fresh bout of hiccup appeared in the form of a statement by a member of the Planning authority who said that defining the poverty line in India is a political, not economic, decision. Almost simultaneously, the Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission, Monteksingh Ahluwalia, came forward with a revised statement claiming that the basis of the actual poverty line is the capacity to spend Rs 859.60 per month or Rs 28.65 per day in urban areas and Rs 672.80 per month or Rs 22.43 per day in rural areas.

The Planning Commission thought that the Supreme Court had advised them to redraw the poverty line on the basis of a lower estimate of poverty. This they did by lowering the threshold of poverty line from Rs 32.00 to Rs 28.65 per day in urban areas and from Rs 26.00 to Rs 22.43 per day in rural areas. As the national debate proceeds, one finds that the Planning body is trying to defend their standpoint stubbornly. They say that the new tentative Below Poverty Line (BPL) criteria was worked out by the Commission on the basis of the Tendulkar Committee report which points to the minimum amount of money required per adult per day to recover the energy loss by calorie intake provided in food, clothing, shelter etc. Secondly, they say that the new BPL criteria framed by them has been approved by the Prime Minister's Office (PMO). Then Indian PM is an eminent economist! Also, they say that if one looks at history one will find that it is not decrement but increment in monetary terms that the Planning body is suggesting! How? Look, in 2004-05, when the UPA-1 government with the Left Front (an alias of CPI-M) was very much on course the BPL criteria on the basis of Tendulkar Committee report was adopted and that criteria set Rs 19 and Rs 15 for urban and rural areas respectively as the poverty line. Carrying these forward to 2009-10 considering the rise in the price-index, says Abhijit Sen, a member of the Planning Commission, gives the figures as Rs 28 and Rs 22 respectively for urban and rural areas. Again considering 15% inflation rate between 2009 and 2011, the BPL criteria have been correctly set at Rs 32 and Rs 26 respectively for urban and rural areas. So, what the Planning body seems to say is that their task is confined only to mathematical calculation and nothing else. "Ask the appointee commission who had fixed the diet for the poor for just regaining the day's energy-loss and the appointer, that is, the Government of India", is by implication, what the Planning Commission seems to say. This way the Planning Commission is shifting responsibility.

It is farcial to follow the wisdom of the Planning Comrission and see where the vast millions of the poor people stand in accordance with their wise prescription. It is safe to consider the urban situation only for the sake of convenience. The per capita maximum expenditure of Rs 32 for an adult living in a city like Kolkata, Mumbai, Delhi, Chennai or Bangalore is the highest point at which he/she is eligible to be within the category, "poor" so that he/she can claim some relief from the government. Taking the average of the price indices of wage goods in these cities, the Commission's award is apportioned in the following way : Rs 5.50 for cereals, Rs 1.02 on pulses. Re 0.33 on milk, Rs 1.55 on edible oil, Rs 1.95 on vegetables, Re 0.45 on fruit, Re 0.70 on sugar. Re 0.80 on salt and spices, Rs 1.50 on other foods and Rs 3.75 on fuel for cooking. All the above items add up to Rs 17.55. An adult according to the Planning Commission can get a rented accommodation at Rs 49.10 per month and he/she can manage with monthly expenditure of Rs 39.70 for health care, Rs 29.60 for education and 61.30 for clothing. Adding the average (Rs 5.95) of the last four expenses to the above total (17.55), one gets Rs 23.50. With the rest (Rs 8.5), the poor in a city should manage his/her occasional expenses on footwear and other personal items.

According to the Planning Commission, these destitutes constituted 37.2% of population in 2004-05 and in 2009-10 the figure has come down to 29.8%. In this way the Planning Commission seeks to give credit to UPA-2 government's performance on the economic front. This is development, they say. The opposition Parties in Parliament do not agree and are shedding crocodile tears for the poor as they do all the time. Their strategy of inaction is aimed at wooing voters and playing with the gallery. But the point at issue is that according to the Planning Commission's admission, about 33 crore Indians are in this dire strait at present. What, then, is the utility of planning for economic development and crores upon crores of rupees' worth of exchequer being spent on this worthless Planning Commission? Is this body not a drain on people's money? □□□