

POVERTY

Some facts and figures

In February 2006, the Centre for Policy Alternatives Society, a registered body, published a detailed report on poverty, "Redefining Poverty – A New Poverty Line for a New India" by Mohan Guruswamy and Ronald Joseph Abraham. The Centre for Policy Alternatives is a privately funded think tank that focuses on the study and review of public policy in India.

The report begins with the dictionary definition of poverty as *a state of condition of having little or no money, goods, or means of support; condition of being poor; indigence*; it reminds us of some of the synonyms for poverty – *penury, destitution, need, want*; it defines the poverty line as *a minimum income level used as an official standard for determining the proportion of population living in poverty*.

The report is very well written, very clear and thoroughly researched. It pulls no punches. It also gives some very telling facts and figures.

- § The official poverty line is based only on calories which allows the government to claim great achievements in reducing poverty. However, if one uses a more expanded definition which includes other basic human needs, then the great majority of Indians are still living in extreme poverty.
- § The official poverty lines are Rs 368 per person per month for rural areas and Rs 559 per person per month for urban areas. They should really be renamed 'starvation lines' for all they do is factor in 650 grams of food grains every day and virtually ignore the other essentials of life.
- § In 1973/74, 54.9% of the population (32.13 crores) were poor. In 2004, 23.6% (24.97 crores) were officially poor, representing a drop of 9.7% in thirty years. This means that poverty declined at the rate of 0.81% per year while over the same period, the economy grew at over 5%.
- § The State needs to ensure that by 2020 every citizen is getting two good meals a day. However, by using the present limited definition of poverty and focusing only on eliminating hunger, government policies are aiming far too low.
- § If we look at the average person who is just above the poverty line, we find that in rural India, he falls short of the caloric norm by 22% and in urban India, by 9%.

- § The Planning Commission has set a caloric standard of 2400 calories yet the ICMR recommends 3800 for men engaged in heavy activity and 2925 for women. More importantly, we need to go beyond mere calories and take into account all the other nutrients necessary for good health.
- § The present poverty line ignores essential nutritional needs as well as basic necessities such as shelter, clothing, healthcare, sanitation, drinking water and equal opportunity education.
- § 47% of Indian children below the age of 5 are underweight for their age. UNICEF also reports that one in every three malnourished child lives in India.
- § A nutritious diet costs Rs 573 per head.
- § Only 20% of Indians are covered by public sector healthcare; the rest rely on the private sector. Clearly, financing one's healthcare is a major burden for the poor.
- § 37.7% of households in India do not have access to a safe water supply within 15 minutes of their home.
- § 49% of all Indian households do not have access to shelters that meet basic standards.
- § 69.5% of Indians do not have access to a toilet.
- § 57% of Indian households do not have electricity
- § Over 90% of rural Indians use polluting, low-grade fuels indoors.
- § Minimum monthly expenditure on healthcare should be Rs 30 per person; on cooking fuel Rs 20; on electricity Rs 35; and on clothing Rs 17.
- § Every child should have access to a free school with a sound infrastructure and qualified teachers and within 2km radius of their home. Where that is not possible, the State should provide transport.
- § 85.2% of India's villages do not have a secondary school.
- § 43% of villages in India are not connected by a road.

The report concludes that if, as it claims, the State is committed to eliminating poverty, then it must begin by redefining the current poverty line.