

Poverty hidden in numbers



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It seems that the definition of poverty itself is responsible for keeping the poor, poor. And, hungry. For the elimination of chronic hunger, poverty identification is a big challenge. At the all-India level, poverty line is based on Uniform Recall Period Consumption (URP) which is the consumption data collected from a 30-day recall period covering all items. According to sources, the Uniform Recall Period Consumption (URP-Consumption) distribution data showed a poverty ratio of 28.3 per cent in the rural areas, 25.7 per cent in the urban areas and 27.5 per cent for the country as a whole in 2004-05.

According to the Planning Commission's latest estimate, poverty in India is reducing. However, there are serious lacunae in this process of arriving at this estimate. Locally available items from forest or agriculture consumed by farmers or tribals are also valued at prevailing prices. These are added to the expenditure on non-food items to give the total monthly per capita expenditure. At the same time, the cost of items and services such as shelter, health or education are counted at the lowest price without considering the present state of inflation. All this adds up to give a picture that is not accurate.

At the all-India level, the poverty line represents the expenditure level of Rs 356.30 in rural areas and Rs 538.60 in urban area per person per month. This is basically a starvation line rather than a poverty line, and virtually impossible for any person to survive at this level of expenditure.

The Planning Commission estimates that in Madhya Pradesh, a family spending Rs 327.78 per person per month in a rural settlement will be considered poor. In an urban settlement, the expenditure level is Rs 570.15 per person per month. In other words, it means, a person spending anything more than Rs 9 every day in a village or Rs 19 in any kind of urban area, will not be considered as poor and will be out of poverty elimination programmes.

In Madhya Pradesh, it is estimated that a population of 249.68 lakh (38.3 per cent) will go to bed hungry, as they simply do not have access to resources to overcome this situation. *Once communities like Sahariya, a primitive tribal group, get trapped in the cycle of chronic hunger, they begin to lose their capacities to contribute to society either economically or socially. At the same time, reviews of existing schemes like Sampoorna Gramin Rozgar Yojana or National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme show such communities as poor contributors and unwilling workers.*

The roots lie in a system which neither allows them rights over natural resources nor enough income to overcome hunger. There have been no land reforms in Madhya Pradesh. This, in spite of the MP government releasing the Bhopal Declaration at the beginning of this millennium, which commits state's priorities of land distribution to dalits.

To add insult to injury, the state government has reduced the common grazing land available to the community while it has been non-committal on ownership rights of the land inhabited by them for generations. This leaves them with very little choice or avenues to challenge their situation of deprivation. The dalits and tribals are ultimately left at the mercy of more powerful castes in the region sans any government protective measures to retain rights on the land.

If control over natural resources is considered the key component for attaining economic independence and overcoming chronic hunger, then Madhya Pradesh has a long way to go. Southern states, in contrast, have demonstrated political will in protection of marginalised sections. Land reforms in Kerala stand testimony to the transformation of the lives of the weakest sections in society. Tamil Nadu's schemes for aged destitutes is an example.

Madhya Pradesh has the lowest and continuously declining food consumption figures and high malnutrition, high infant mortality compared to other states. Its life expectancy of 57.7 years is, for instance, much lower than Kerala's 73.9 years. This is reflective of the policies of exclusion, an unbridled exploitation of natural resources for revenue generation which has pushed larger sections of society to the margins while the few continue to benefit from such policies.

The politics of exclusion which ties in with the perpetuation of poverty and the prevalence of hunger has a long history. At the beginning of the British Raj, the colonial rulers took steps to establish control over the natural resources to set up infrastructure for railway tracks, industry and, later, for shipbuilding. There was no commitment to preserving natural resources, which for colonial rulers was not a priority. What is unfortunate is that independent India continued to follow this policy, at least in the initial years.

At the end of this dark tunnel, however, there seems to be a light for those who have been excluded in the development process. And, this has led to perspectives changing gradually among policy makers. It is now widely acknowledged that losing access to forest and forest produce has been highly detrimental for the tribal population in Madhya Pradesh and across India.

The Forest Rights Act is a response to this growing belief, now within policy circles, to correct this. The Act will improve the tribals' access not only to land for agriculture, but also to non-timber forest produce, food items and give protection to livestock. A genuine implementation of Forest Rights Act would result in the handing over of rights of forest land and its resources to the four lakh tribal and other forest dwelling families. That would be a concrete step in not only recognising the inherent rights of these communities but in creating a protective mechanism to stave off hunger and curtail poverty.

This is the only expectation one has from those who set policy and govern. To respond to poverty not merely as a statistics but take measures that would bring the poor gradually out of its clutches, to move out from the safety of poverty definitions and address ground realities.

<http://www.hardnewsmedia.com/2009/04/2786>

Van Gujjars in nowhere land

A prejudiced bureaucracy has chosen to shut its ears to the pleas of Van Gujjars who have been denied entry into their traditional grasslands in Uttarkashi whereas forest dwellers in the rest of the country are being granted forest rights under the Forest Rights Act

**SMA Kazmi
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Come summers and the nomad Van Gujjar tribe residing in the Shivalik forest ranges and Rajaji National Park area that migrates to higher reaches nowhere to go with their entry into traditional grass-lands banned.

While forest dwellers in the country are being granted forest rights through the Forest Rights Act, the Van Gujjars of Uttarakhand have been denied entry into their traditional grasslands in Uttarkashi district.

The tribesmen find themselves stranded on road with their families and cattle. Van Gujjar families had left for their summer abode in the high-altitude grasslands in Govind Pashu Vihar National Park. They have nowhere to go now as they have been denied entry by forest officials. With the temperature rising, their buffaloes are on the verge of starvation with no fodder and water. The family members are also falling ill.



The move by the government has come as a rude shock to this indigenous nomadic community, especially when under the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act there has been a move countrywide to recognise and provide forest rights to communities who have been residing in forests for generations.

Although several delegations of the community have met the officials concerned, a prejudiced bureaucracy has chosen to shut its ears to the pleas of these nomads.

The Van Gujjars move up with their livestock to the higher reaches of the Himalaya during summers and coming down to the Shivaliks in winters.

Thus, their summer home is in Govind Pashu Vihar National Park (GNP) in Uttarkashi district and the Shimla hills. These Gujjars have a legal and recognized right over forests as they pay "lopping tax" and "grazing tax" to the forest department.

The community alleges that this move by the Uttarakhand government was pre-planned as last year it was not issued any receipts for these taxes.

"Last year, we were not issued any receipts despite paying the taxes. Perhaps, this was a deliberate move by officials to prevent us from going to highland pastures this year," says Firoz Kasana, a Gujjar leader.

Munesh Sharma, field coordinator at SOPHIA, a non-government organisation working for tribesmen, alleges that this was a ploy by the forest department to deny proof to the Van Gujjars while making a claim to forest rights. An application has already been filed under the RTI Act to get these receipts.

Apparently, the bureaucracy is withholding the right to the Van Gujjars on the pretext that they do not belong to the state of Uttarakhand. After Uttarakhand was carved out of Uttar Pradesh, the Shivalik forest in close proximity to Rajaji National Park fell within the state of Uttarakhand while other parts of the Shivaliks are in Saharanpur district of UP.

Many of these Van Gujjars migrate from UP to Himachal passing through Uttarakhand, but the forest department is bent on stopping the Van Gujjars come from UP. In fact, with the implementation of the Traditional Forest Dwellers Act, the move by the Uttarakhand forest department is an attempt to deprive these 100-odd families of their migration and grazing rights so that they are unable to lay a claim to their traditional forest grazing land this Act is implemented.

"This last-ditch strategy of the forest department to terminate the rights of poor forest-dependant communities so that they cannot claim any right on minor forest produce under the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act is illegal and an insult to the Van Gujjar community and marginalised sections," alleged Parveen Kaushal of SOPHIA.

The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act-2006 published by the Gazette of India reads that this is "an Act to recognise and vest forest rights and occupation on forest land in forest dwelling STs and others residing in forests for generations."

After much delay this Act was notified by the Uttarakhand government on November 2008. Official statistics from the Press Information Bureau indicate that by November 2008 land claims of 94,264 forest-dwellers in the country had been settled and 86,455 were ready for settlement. However, nothing was done in Uttarakhand that has a sizeable population of forest-dependent communities. Most people living in the hills of Uttarakhand are directly or indirectly dependent on forests for livelihood, fodder and fuel.

The requirement of constituting forest rights committees have not been complied with. In neighbouring Uttar Pradesh Van Gujjars have become members and office-bearers of such committees. Orissa has received 1,91,460 forest rights claims for 4 lakh hectares of land.

A Van Gujjar delegation today met officials of Rajaji National Park and pleaded for claim on their forest rights and permission to go to summer grasslands in the hills. Forest officials argue that these Van Gujjars are not residents of the state but residing in Uttar Pradesh Shivaliks and will not be allowed to move to higher reaches.

The Van Gujjars stranded with their families and cattle on the bank of the Assan near Vikas Nagar on their way to summer pastures in Uttarkashi are running pillar to post to get official clearance.

Sabran Lal, deputy Director, Rajaji National Park, says a decision on the Gujjars will be taken in a day or two. "We have neither given permission nor stopped them," he said when contacted.

Finally, incentive for keeping green

**Jotirmay Thapliyal
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Uttarakhand that has more than 60 per cent of land mass under forest cover, may finally get some incentive for its contribution to the forest wealth of the country.

The Union Planning Commission has proposed a formula to decide on incentives to be provided to forest-rich states in lieu of the forest cover maintained by them. At present there is no mechanism to give incentives to states for protecting its forests.

Forest-rich states like Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh and the North East have for quite some time been expressing concern over forests proving to be an hindrance in carrying out development activities in their respective states.

They argue that while these forests help maintain healthy environs in the country, apart from providing other services, these forest-rich states suffer in the process as they not only incur costs in maintaining these, but prove hindrance to development.

Uttarakhand has a 1.6 per cent share in the total forest area of the country. According to the State of Forest Report, Uttarakhand has over 65 per cent of forest area, including 46 per cent of pure forest cover.

But it is under pressure to maintain its forest wealth for its contribution towards betterment of environment in the country.

Union Planning Commission has been quite some time contemplating modalities to provide incentive to all forest-rich states. But then finding a criteria to compensate these states has not been easy.

The Planning Commission held a meeting on "avoided deforestation incentive mechanism" at the Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education in Dehradun on March 23, where the it entrusted the latter to come up with a formula that could help decide on the quantum of incentive to these states.

Sources say Uttarakhand is bound to benefit as the new formula will take into consideration not only the percentage of forest cover at the national level, but also its tree cover.

The state will benefit in the process with the proposed funding likely to begin this financial year and it will continue for five years once the modalities are finalised. It is a general assumption that forests are a hindrance to Uttarakhand's progress.

But with Planning Commission's initiative to provide incentives, Uttarakhand forests have definitely found a new meaning in terms of assets, Principal Chief Conservator of Forests Dr RBS Rawat said.

Referring to the recent meeting of forest-predominant states with Planning Commission members under the guidance of the ICFRE, Uttarakhand PCCF held that they had put forward the concerns of the state most effectively.

He held that Uttarakhand had made it amply clear rivers important to the entire Indo-Gangetic plain-Ganga, Yamuna, Sharda and Kali- either emanated from Uttarakhand or had its initial stretches in the state providing major environmental services to the nation.

The hefty amount that is to be provided by the Planning Commission to the state over a period of five years will not only be utilised for plantations, but also help create livelihood opportunities.

The amount will be utilised for strengthening activities of women mobile nurseries, cultivation of medicinal plants and the institution of Van Panchayats.

In November 2007, a study evaluated Uttarakhand forests at \$2.4 billion (approximately Rs 10,700 crore) per year in terms of the services these provide.

Ecosystem services rendered include carbon sequestration, climate management, hydrological regulation, timber, firewood, soil conservation and pollination.

A study entitled "Valuation of eco system services and forest governance" prepared by the Leadership for Environment and Development (LEAD) India and its partner organisation, Central Himalayan Environmental Association (CHEA) under the guidance of Prof SP Singh, had said that services rendered by Uttarakhand forests needed to be recognised and compensated.

For Uttarakhand, maintaining its forest cover at the cost of development has been a major challenge. People in general see the Forest Conservation Act as a biggest stumbling block in the state's pursuit of speedy development, The approval of land transfer linked to forest land is tardy and time-consuming.

Several development schemes in the state have been affected due to the Act, particularly in the hilly areas.

These development schemes include construction of roads, hospitals, tourist centres and other key infrastructural facilities. Hydro power projects too suffer due the Act.

Foresters admit that clearance for the transfer of land from the Centre is a complex process but the legislation is the only means to put a check to the endless exploitation of forests.

"Hindrance-less clearance could have disastrous environmental consequences," they warn. Prof NP Todaria from HNB Garhwal University advocates incentive for states maintaining their forest cover.

"The Planning Commission's initiative is certainly a welcome," he said, adding that absence of such incentives made the forest-rich states feel that while they were solely being held responsible for maintaining forest cover in the country, that too at the cost of development, little was being done to compensate them for the same.

The National Forest Commission feels while some states are blessed with forest cover well in excess of the 33 per cent aimed nationally, these forest-rich states must maintain a level of forest cover higher than the rest of the country.

This entails a high conservation cost whereas economically better off states with less forest cover get away by spending far less.

<http://www.tribuneindia.com/2009/20090401/dplus.htm#1>

Maoists train guns on Similipal tiger project

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BARIPADA: The Maoist assailants involved in Sunday's rampage in Similipal have threatened to disrupt a tiger project in the famous reserve.

The threat was issued through Hindi and Oriya posters pasted on the walls of the forest rest house at Chahala. "Yeh jungle aur zameen hamara hai. Simlipal jungle mein adivasi logo ke upar tiger project ka dadagiri nahi chalega. Agar chala toh aag lagega (This jungle and land belongs to us. We won't allow the tiger project to be imposed on the tribals living in Similipal. If our diktat goes unheeded, we will set fire to the area)," one of the posters seized by STR officials from the area said. The Maoists also threatened the "Project Tiger" officials to quit the Core Area or else they would be killed, sources added. The field staff of the STR have now been patrolling along the "fringe areas" of the "Core Area" of the reserve, officials said.

The STR field director-cum-conservator of forest R.Naga Raja Reddy, said is suffering from shortage of field staff. There are only 49 forest guards against the sanctioned strength of 108. There are only eight range officers when there should have been 13. At least 17 posts of foresters are lying vacant against the sanctioned strength of 44. The field director said the Special Tiger Protection Force (STPF) conceived by the National Tiger Conservation Authority about a year ago should be constituted as quickly as possible. The STPF can protect the majestic tiger as well as combat Maoists threat. The NTCA has already approved constitution of one company of STPF in the line of Indian Reserve Battalion.

"The STPF personnel when recruited will receive special training from Orissa police as well as the Central paramilitary forces based on a special syllabus for skill development, combating poaching and enabling intelligence-based enforcement in a forest terrain," he said. And such a force was the need of the hour in Simlipal, official said. Only its implementation is awaited, Reddy said. Reddy also pleaded for

providing armed police personnel at all the seven range offices located inside Simlipal Tiger Reserve as a "confidence building measure" for the unarmed forest official manning these range offices.

<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/Bhubaneswar/Maoists-train-guns-on-Simlipal-tiger-project/articleshow/4341472.cms>