

Poverty of state action in Haryana by J. George



Tuesday, May 1, 2007, Chandigarh, India
<http://www.tribuneindia.com/2007/20070501/edit.htm#4>

THE poverty ratio figures released at the end of March this year, based on the National Sample Survey Organisation's (NSSO) 61st round survey for 2004-05, clearly indicate the worsening of the poverty ratio in Haryana.

Roughly, one in every 10 Haryanvi in 2004-05 was directly looking towards the state policies and programmes for livelihood options, as well as sustenance of body and soul.

Two contradictory pieces of recent information have further added to the confusion. They are the Haryana Finance Minister's budget speech determination to ensure that Haryana remains in the forefront of the 'India Growth Story' and the newest (mid-February 2007) decision to scrap the poverty line survey.

The former relates to the economic performance experience while the later is with regard to ensuring social justice. Both are integral parts of the constitutional obligation. Interestingly, 2004-05, provides a potent dividing line between the 'India Shining' and the 'India Growth Story'. The devil is indeed in the details.

Does it mean that the poor have become poorer in Haryana in general and rural areas in particular? Yes, the growth story line of the 'India Shining' framework did make for the worse fears coming true. But why the knee-jerk move to resurvey the poor people in rural Haryana?

The comparable Below Poverty Line (BPL) figures between 1999-2000 and 2004-05, distinctly non-Congress periods, indicate about one percentage point (21.5 lakh) increase in rural Haryana. The rural-urban combined increase is to the tune of 1.16 percentage points (32.1 lakh).

The growth storyline again comes into focus for two significant reasons. First, the high economic growth must also translate itself into higher rates of poverty reduction. This has not happened in Haryana. This deficiency is solely on account of poor operating procedures of the department charged with poverty alleviation programmes. Problems with identification of the poor households are merely a ruse for no action.

Secondly, the agriculture sector, undoubtedly, is the key. The saga of her neglect acutely reflects on the source of growth. During the 1999-2000 to 2004-05 periods, the primary sector's share in the Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) came down from about one-third (32 per cent) to slightly over one-fifth (23 per cent).

In this fall, the growth rate too declined, decaying the fruit of gains. This resulted in a sharp dip in the real wages. The state machinery could not wake up from her slumber due to complete lack of sensitivities.

Have we anything new to suggest that pro-poor sensitivities have developed amongst the functionaries? The cutting-edge level functionaries carried out the 2006 BPL survey. Have they acquired some magical capacity in 2007 to properly identify the poor households?

The Planning Commission prescribed format of 13 parameters in four levels, is certainly not flawless. But the involvement of gram sabha and scaling methods did attempt some element of transparency. The manufactured consent, for instance, of the gram sabha is the oft-quoted field reality. The same set of officials will carry out the fresh survey, albeit, on five parameters alone.

Before the appropriateness of this approach is examined, new parameters need to be listed. These vague and arbitrary considerations are land-holding, type of house, household goods, literacy level of the earning member and source of livelihood. The inventiveness of the field functionaries therefore will get all opportunity for practice.

The main cause of action for the fresh survey is to get more development assistance from the central kitty on account of poverty reduction strategy. The state claims to be on a high income growth pathways where the agriculture sector is in the red. The tertiary (services) sector with about 45% share was clocking nearly 12% growth rate.

Obviously, the Haryana rural development mandarins in particular and the development planners in general, have forgotten their fundamentals. An update will greatly help them to realise and reiterate a strong correlation between the agriculture sector performance, real wages and poverty reduction. Must the rural population suffer these archaic, development pen-pushers?

The national common minimum programme, the millennium development goals and the Supreme Court in the recent past have emphasised on the decentralisation of delivery of public services that alleviate poverty. The poverty of action has indeed made a mockery of the poverty alleviation programme in a high-income growth state.

***[The writer is the Convenor, National Implementing Agency,
Capacity Building for Poverty Reduction, at the Haryana
Institute of Public Administration]***