

# Changes in Level of Living in Rural West Bengal

## Variations Across Socio-Economic Groups

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*This is the last in a series of six papers reporting on changes in the level of living in rural West Bengal as reflected in the results of a resurvey of households in villages of Bardhaman, Birbhum and Purulia districts. In this paper the authors report some results obtained on changes in housing conditions and the level of consumption for sample households classified by occupation groups and caste-tribe identities.*

IN our earlier communications (*vide* references), we have reported the results of a resurvey of villages and households on several aspects of level of living in rural areas of three districts of West Bengal—Bardhaman, Birbhum and Purulia. Except for the fourth paper of the series, i.e. the paper on 'Consumer Durables, Clothing and Footwear' (*EPW*, October 31, 1987), we reported the findings for the population as a whole. In the fourth paper, that relating to consumer durables, we reported the results for a number of socio-economic groups. We found that there has been some improvement in the stocks of consumer durables particularly among the white-collar workers as well as among households possessing larger amount of land as well as for non-scheduled caste/tribe households. In this paper we report some results obtained through the resurvey on changes in housing conditions and the level of consumption for sample households classified by occupation groups, and caste-tribe identities. It may be noted that such an analysis is not possible in case of social consumption, as data on social consumption have been collected mainly through village schedules filled up by interviewing some selected knowledgeable respondents. Details of the survey design were presented in the first two communications.

### HOUSING CONDITIONS

Tables 1 and 2 present a comparative picture of housing conditions for households classified by occupation and caste-tribe identity respectively. In examining housing conditions, we considered the number of rooms, the area of rooms (i.e. floor space) and the type of structure (*viz. pucca, semi-pucca and katcha*) of the dwellings occupied by the sample household. In our earlier paper on housing conditions (*EPW*, September 5-12, 1987), we reported a deterioration in housing standards for the population as a whole.

Table 1 shows the per capita and per household availability of rooms and floor space during 1973-74 and 1985-86 by occupation groups. It appears that both the per capita and per household floor space and number of rooms have declined over the 12-year period for all the occupation groups except white-collar workers. For white-collar workers, the number of rooms per household as well as per person have marginally increased, whereas floor space per household or per person has marginally decreased. Thus, for white-collar workers the housing standards do not show any clear deterioration as observed in the case of the other occupational groups. As for households grouped by the caste-tribe identity, the

housing standards are found to have deteriorated for all the groups considered (Table 2).

As Table 3 shows, it is the white-collar workers who have largely reported changes in their structure of dwellings from *katcha* to *pucca* or *semi-pucca* and from *semi-pucca* to *pucca*. An opposite picture, *viz.* changes from *semi-pucca* to *katcha* and from *pucca* to *semi-pucca* or *katcha* was observed in the case of tenants, agricultural labourers, artisans and retail traders. As may be observed in Table 4, households belonging to scheduled castes and scheduled tribes largely reported changes in their structure of dwellings from *semi-pucca* or *pucca* to *katcha*. What comes out very clearly is that improvement of housing conditions has taken place largely among white-collar workers, and people belonging to non-scheduled castes and tribes. For the weaker section of the population, the housing standard seems to have worsened between 1973-74 and 1985-86.

### PRIVATE CONSUMPTION

We face some major difficulties in the treatment of this part because of most of the data are in value terms and there are no satisfactory means of inferring the changes in real terms. Table 5 presents for the occupation groups considered before the per capita consumption expenditure in the two

TABLE 1: HOUSING CONDITIONS BY OCCUPATION GROUPS DURING NSS 28TH ROUND (1973-74) AND DURING THE RESURVEY (1985-86)

Household Occupation	N S S 28th Round (1973-74)						Resurvey (1985-86)					
	No of Sample Households	Average H H Size	Per H H No of Rooms	Per H H Floor Space (Sqmt)	Per Capita No of Rooms	Per Capita Floor Space (Sqmt)	No of Sample Households	Average H H Size	Per H H No of Rooms	Per H H Floor Space (Sqmt)	Per Capita No of Rooms	Per Capita Floor Space (Sqmt)
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)
Owner-cultivator	352	6.7	3.50	44.43	0.53	6.68	459	6.6	3.10	30.37	0.47	4.57
Tenant-cultivator	42	5.9	2.52	27.43	0.43	4.65	57	6.5	2.29	21.26	0.35	3.26
Agri labourer	269	4.8	1.64	17.23	0.34	3.61	334	4.8	1.56	12.94	0.33	2.70
Artisan, retail trader	56	5.7	2.77	31.70	0.49	5.58	56	5.2	2.12	17.10	0.40	3.27
Non-white-collar worker	82	5.4	1.99	21.89	0.37	4.07	110	5.6	2.02	18.32	0.36	3.29
White-collar worker	71	5.5	2.86	29.59	0.52	5.33	60	5.9	3.14	29.17	0.53	4.90
Others	52	3.3	2.67	29.42	0.80	8.83	77	2.3	1.72	15.96	0.75	6.93
All occupations	924	5.6	2.62	30.73	0.47	5.48	1153	5.7	2.42	22.40	0.43	3.94

periods. One may not conclude that the real changes in the levels of living of these different groups are as indicated by the index in column (6) representing the proportionate increase of the total per capita consumption expenditure in money terms. This is for two reasons. One is that the commodity composition is different for the different groups and therefore to eliminate the price effect

one would require different index numbers appropriate for the different groups. However, no such index numbers are available. As is well known, statistical authorities in this country publish one index number for industrial labourers in some big cities, and another index number for agricultural labourers. This last index number is constructed in such a way and on the basis of

such flimsy data that it cannot be treated as useful even for agricultural labourers in any part of the country. There is no question of applying this index number to the expenditure figures of owner cultivators and therefore there is no means of comparing the improvements of owner cultivators and labourers. The same is true of comparison between any two other groups.

TABLE 2: HOUSING CONDITIONS BY CASTE TRIBE IDENTITY OF HOUSEHOLDS DURING NSS 28TH ROUND (1973-74) AND DURING THE RESURVEY (1985-86)

Group	N S S 28th Round (1973-74)						Resurvey (1985-86)					
	No of Sample House-holds	Average H H Size	Per H H No of Rooms	Per H H Floor Space (Sqm)	Per Capita No of Rooms	Per Capita Floor Space (Sqm)	No of Sample House-holds	Average H H Size	Per H H No of Rooms	Per H H Floor Space (Sqm)	Per Capita No of Rooms	Per Capita Floor Space (Sqm)
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)
Scheduled caste	322	5.1	1.90	21.52	0.38	4.25	407	5.3	1.85	16.41	0.35	3.11
Scheduled tribe	61	5.0	1.78	19.30	0.35	3.82	53	4.9	1.30	13.16	0.26	2.66
Others	541	6.0	3.16	37.68	0.52	6.25	693	6.0	2.84	26.64	0.47	4.45
All groups	924	5.6	2.62	30.73	0.47	5.48	1153	5.7	2.42	22.40	0.43	3.94

TABLE 3: PERCENTAGE OF HOUSEHOLDS REPORTING CHANGES IN THE STRUCTURE OF DWELLING DURING NSS 28TH ROUND (1973-74) AND DURING THE RESURVEY (1985-86) BY OCCUPATION GROUPS

Household Occupation	No of Sample Household	Type of Changes					
		Katcha to Pucca	Katcha to Semi-pucca	Semi-Pucca to Pucca	Semi-pucca to Katcha	Pucca to Semi-pucca	Pucca to Katcha
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Owner cultivator	459	5.1	6.0	2.1	15.9	0.7	2.3
Tenant cultivator	57	0.0	0.0	2.4	7.3	0.0	2.4
Agricultural labourer	334	0.3	3.1	0.0	6.9	0.6	1.3
Artisan, retail trader, etc	56	1.3	2.6	1.3	16.9	0.0	3.9
Non-white-collar worker	110	4.9	1.6	4.1	12.3	1.6	4.1
White-collar worker	60	5.1	4.2	11.0	12.7	3.4	5.1
Others	77	2.3	2.3	0.0	7.0	0.0	0.0
All occupations	1153	3.2	4.0	2.5	12.1	1.0	2.4

TABLE 4: PERCENTAGE OF HOUSEHOLDS REPORTING CHANGES IN THE STRUCTURE OF DWELLING DURING NSS 28TH ROUND (1973-74) AND DURING THE RESURVEY (1985-86) BY CASTE AND TRIBE IDENTITY OF HOUSEHOLDS

Group	No of Sample Households	Type of Changes					
		Katcha to Pucca	Katcha to Semi-pucca	Semi-Pucca to Pucca	Semi-pucca to Katcha	Pucca to Semi-pucca	Pucca to Katcha
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Scheduled caste	407	1.0	2.9	1.7	9.1	1.0	1.2
Scheduled tribe	53	0.0	5.7	0.0	9.4	0.0	1.9
Others	693	4.8	4.5	3.2	14.1	1.0	3.2
All groups	1153	3.2	4.0	2.5	12.1	1.0	2.4

TABLE 5: AVERAGE PER CAPITA CONSUMPTION PER 30 DAYS DURING NSS 27TH ROUND (1972-73) AND RESURVEY (1985-86) IN RURAL AREAS BY OCCUPATION GROUPS

Household Occupation	No of Sample Households		Per Capita Consumption Expenditure at Current Prices (in Rs 0.00)		Index of Growth Col (5)/Col (4)	Engels Ratio	
	1972-73	1985-86	1972-73	1985-86		1972-73	1985-86
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Owner cultivator	143	194	46.87	105.24	2.25	0.78	0.73
Tenant cultivator	19	31	42.05	87.12	2.07	0.79	0.80
Agricultural labourer	236	308	23.60	72.40	3.07	0.85	0.78
Artisan and retail trader	43	63	34.56	104.36	3.02	0.79	0.74
Non white-collar worker	61	110	31.49	106.81	3.39	0.83	0.78
White-collar worker	33	42	53.58	157.25	2.93	0.79	0.66
Others	57	42	28.23	105.71	3.74	0.84	0.80
All occupations	592	790	37.88	98.92	2.61	0.80	0.75

Another serious problem is given rise to by the fact that in the NSS, home consumption, principally of food items, is imputed at harvest prices whereas the purchased items are valued at retail prices which also change over time. This creates a serious problem for any comparison between owner cultivators and tenants and other social groups. That is because a large part of the

food consumption by owner cultivators and tenants is from home produced goods. Agricultural labourers are also affected to the extent that a part of their wages is paid in kind and that part is valued at harvest price. It may safely be inferred that when comparing with other social groups the total expenditure figure for owner cultivators and tenants is underestimated, but one does not

know the degree of underestimation.

This problem of different prices for different groups making difficulties for comparisons may be partly circumvented by taking recourse to the Engels ratio which, as we know, is a good indicator of the level of living. The ratios for the different groups are also presented in Table 5. Basing ourselves on these ratios and keeping in mind the underestimation affecting owner cultivators and tenants and to a lesser extent agricultural labourers, our best guess about the rankings at the two end periods is presented in Table 6.

If our reading is correct then white-collar workers were at the top of the scale in both the periods. Owner cultivators improved their relative position over artisans and traders as well as tenants. Among these three groups there were no sharp differences in the initial period. Labourers both agricultural and non-agricultural and the residual category of 'others' had, it would seem, about the same standard in both the periods—the higher money figure for non-agricultural labourers and 'others' are probably due to the difference in retail price and harvest price that we have mentioned before. The tenants seem to have clearly fallen behind from being more or less at the same level as owner cultivators they descended to the level of labourers.

Some more information about the differential levels of living can be obtained from the figures of cereals consumption which was collected in quantity terms (Table 7). The ranking here is different and that is to be expected. Cereal consumption is something that is not a very sensitive indicator of level of living. Agricultural and non-agricultural labourers as well as 'others' consume the least at both the end periods. White-collar workers and owner cultivators likewise consume the most at both those periods. However, the ranking between these two top categories gets changed over the period. The per capita consumption for owner cultivators actually decreases while in the case of white-collar workers it increases. This may not however be interpreted as indicating a decrease in the level of living of owner cultivators, neither in absolute

TABLE 6: RANKING OF DIFFERENT OCCUPATIONAL GROUPS BASED ON ENGELS RATIOS

1972-73	1985-86
1 Agricultural labourers, non-agricultural labourers and 'others'	1 Agricultural labourers, non-agricultural labourers, tenants, and 'others'
2 Artisans and traders, tenants and owner cultivators	2 Artisans and traders,
3 White-collar workers	3 Owner cultivators
	4 White-collar workers

TABLE 7: AVERAGE PER CAPITA CONSUMPTION OF CEREALS (QTY) PER 30 DAYS DURING NSS 27TH ROUND (1972-73) AND RESURVEY (1985-86) IN RURAL AREAS BY OCCUPATION GROUPS

Household Occupation	No of Sample Households		Consumption Per Person Per 30 Days Cereals Quantity (Kg)	
	1972-73	1985-86	1972-73	1985-86
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Owner cultivator	143	194	17.02	15.06
Tenant cultivator	19	31	15.75	14.77
Agricultural labourer	236	308	10.40	13.06
Artisan and retail trader	43	63	13.04	14.31
Non-white-collar worker	61	110	11.56	14.84
White-collar worker	33	42	15.78	16.31
Others	57	42	12.69	14.56
All occupations	592	790	14.43	14.42

TABLE 8: PROPORTION OF HOUSEHOLDS REPORTING ZERO CONSUMPTION OF CERTAIN SELECTED FOOD ITEMS BY OCCUPATION GROUPS

Household Occupation	Milk	Sugar	Meat	Fish
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Owner cultivator	32.5	1.5	56.7	7.2
Tenant cultivator	53.4	3.3	70.1	16.8
Agricultural labourer	89.6	16.0	88.6	16.6
Artisan and retail trader	41.5	4.3	57.2	12.9
Non-white-collar worker	55.5	10.9	57.4	11.8
White-collar worker	35.6	14.3	46.4	5.4
Others	65.3	26.1	65.4	26.1
All occupations	60.6	10.4	69.2	12.8

TABLE 9: PROPORTION OF HOUSEHOLDS REPORTING INCREASE/DECREASE IN CONSUMPTION OF CERTAIN SELECTED FOOD ITEMS AND PER CAPITA CONSUMPTION EXPENDITURE (PCE) BY OCCUPATION GROUPS

Household Consumption	Milk		Sugar		Meat		Fish		PCE	
	Decrease	Increase	Decrease	Increase	Decrease	Increase	Decrease	Increase	Decrease	Increase
	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)
Owner cultivator	24.7	40.7	16.9	66.7	23.7	16.0	29.4	53.6	50.5	49.5
Tenant cultivator	23.3	23.3	13.3	80.1	26.6	3.3	26.6	36.6	60.0	40.0
Agricultural labourer	4.5	5.9	8.5	71.9	5.2	5.9	24.1	54.7	38.4	61.6
Artisan and retail trader	24.2	27.2	17.1	64.3	22.8	12.9	34.3	42.8	44.3	55.7
Non-white-collar worker	9.1	33.6	16.4	66.3	16.3	13.6	20.9	61.8	40.0	60.0
White-collar worker	17.9	34.0	32.1	48.2	21.4	30.4	32.1	60.7	66.1	33.9
Others	8.7	26.0	17.4	43.5	8.6	26.0	26.0	43.6	39.1	60.9
All occupations	13.6	23.4	14.4	67.2	14.9	13.7	26.5	53.9	45.1	54.9

terms nor in relation to white-collar workers. That is because, owner cultivators consume cereals at the saturation level and for them it may well behave as an inferior commodity. The decrease in quantity terms of cereals consumption by tenants however requires to be interpreted differently; it suggests an absolute decline in their level of living.

Some more information may be extracted from the proportion of respondents, reporting zero consumption of a selected number of items both at the beginning and at the end periods and this may be used for judging the relative standards of different groups (Table 8). The placing of agricultural and non-agricultural labourers and 'others' at the bottom receives confirmation. The position of owner cultivators and white-collar

workers at the top also gets confirmation. The other categories lie in between.

Till now, we have talked about each social group as if it were a homogeneous unit. As a matter of fact each group seems to be divided amongst those who have improved their levels of living and those who have become worse off. Table 9 presents figures of these divisions in respect of total per capita consumption expenditure as well as the individual items considered in Table 8.

We now present some results for a different scheme of grouping. We have divided the respondents between scheduled tribes, scheduled caste Hindus and 'others'. If we keep in mind that scheduled caste and scheduled tribe people are mostly labourers and the 'others' include the bulk of owner

cultivators and white-collar workers then the information presented in Tables 10, 11, 12 and 13 are consistent with Tables 5, 7, 8 and 9. However what is of striking interest in these sets of tables is the higher initial position of scheduled tribes in relation to scheduled caste Hindus and their losing that advantage in course of the 13 year period. An alarming point to note is the decrease in the per capita cereal consumption by scheduled tribe people. By no means can cereals be treated as an inferior good for this category. As such, this reduction in cereals consumption unmistakably reflects a real diminution of the level of living of scheduled tribes.

## Notes

- 1 It is based on a joint consideration of the materials used for roof, walls and floor. NSS definitions of the three types of structures have been followed. *Pucca* houses are those where both walls and roof are made of oven-burnt bricks, stone, cement concrete, jackboard (cement plastered reeds) and timber. Tiles, galvanised iron or asbestos cement sheets used in roofs are also regarded as *pucca* materials. A semi-*pucca* house is one which is not *pucca* but where either plinth or wall or roof is made of ovenburnt bricks, stones, cement concrete or timber. A *katcha* house is one where the walls, roof and plinth are all made of unburnt bricks, bamboo, mud, grass or leaves, reeds and/or thatch.
- 2 The authors are grateful to the authorities of the NSS organisation, government of India, for supplying them necessary information including household lists and filled up schedules of NSS 27th and 28th round enquiries on consumer expenditure and housing conditions, respectively.

## References

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TABLE 10: AVERAGE PER CAPITA CONSUMPTION PER 30 DAYS DURING NSS 27TH ROUND (1972-73) AND RESURVEY (1985-86) IN RURAL AREAS BY CASTE-TRIBE IDENTITY OF HOUSEHOLDS

Identity	No of Sample Households		Per Capita Consumption Expenditure at Current Prices (Rs)		Index of Growth Col (5)/ Col (4)	Engels Ratio	
	1972-73	1985-86	1972-73	1985-86		1972-73	1985-86
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Scheduled caste	269	329	22.94	80.72	3.52	0.81	0.73
Scheduled tribe	92	84	33.29	87.26	2.62	0.81	0.73
Others	231	377	46.63	109.76	2.35	0.79	0.75
All groups	592	790	37.88	98.92	2.61	0.80	0.75

TABLE 11: AVERAGE PER CAPITA CONSUMPTION OF CEREALS (QTY) PER 30 DAYS DURING NSS 27TH ROUND (1972-73) AND RESURVEY (1985-86) IN RURAL AREAS BY CASTE-TRIBE IDENTITY OF HOUSEHOLDS

Identity	No of Sample Households		Consumption Per Person Per 30 Days Cereals Quantity (Kg)	
	1972-73	1985-86	1972-73	1985-86
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Scheduled caste	269	329	10.39	13.63
Scheduled tribe	92	84	14.36	13.87
Others	231	377	15.30	15.00
All groups	592	790	14.43	14.42

TABLE 12: PROPORTION OF HOUSEHOLDS REPORTING 'ZERO' CONSUMPTION OF CERTAIN SELECTED FOOD ITEMS BY CASTE-TRIBE IDENTITY OF HOUSEHOLDS

Identity	Milk	Sugar	Meat	Fish
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Scheduled caste	73.3	10.6	85.7	11.6
Scheduled tribe	100.0	29.8	90.5	21.4
Others	41.0	5.8	50.5	11.9
All groups	60.6	10.4	69.2	12.8

TABLE 13: PROPORTION OF HOUSEHOLDS REPORTING INCREASE/DECREASE IN CONSUMPTION OF CERTAIN SELECTED FOOD ITEMS AND PER CAPITA CONSUMPTION EXPENDITURE (PCE) BY CASTE-TRIBE IDENTITY OF HOUSEHOLDS

Identity	Milk		Sugar		Meat		Fish		PCE	
	Decrease	Increase	Decrease	Increase	Decrease	Increase	Decrease	Increase	Decrease	Increase
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)
Scheduled caste	9.7	16.7	9.4	75.4	7.6	6.4	26.4	55.0	41.1	58.9
Scheduled tribe	0.0	0.0	10.6	59.6	9.5	0.0	27.4	46.4	40.5	59.5
Others	20.2	34.3	19.6	61.6	22.8	22.5	26.6	54.3	49.9	50.1
All groups	13.6	23.4	14.4	67.2	14.9	13.7	26.5	53.9	45.1	54.9