

# Changes in Level of Living in Rural West Bengal

## Private Consumption

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*A resurvey in 1985-86 of villages and households in three districts of West Bengal which were covered by the National Sample Survey in its 27th and 28th rounds reveals that there was little change in consumption standards for the food component of household consumption and only a mild improvement in the non-food part. Absolute levels of household consumption remained nearly as dismal in 1985-86 as in 1972-73.*

[This is the first of a series of papers which the authors propose to contribute comparing the results of the resurvey and the NSS.]

THIS is the first of a series of papers which we propose to write based on a resurvey of villages and households in those districts of West Bengal, namely, Bardhaman, Birbhum and Purulia which were covered by the National Sample Survey in its 27th (July 1972-June 1973) and 28th (October 1973-June 1974) rounds for enquiries on consumer expenditure and housing conditions respectively. This paper relates to private consumption in the household sector. The subsequent papers will cover other aspects of the multi-dimensional concept of level of living—social consumption (i.e., consumption of public goods) and infrastructural facilities in the villages, housing conditions and stocks of consumer durables. The primary focus of this resurvey was on measurement of changes on level of living over time in rural areas through a joint consideration of several dimensions of level of living. A side interest of ours was to try out the approach of revisiting the same villages and households after a time interval, which may have obvious advantages over that of surveying independently drawn samples of units every year as is usually done by the NSS organisation, government of India.

### The Plan of the Resurvey

The sample households interviewed for the 27th round consumer expenditure enquiry in rural areas of the districts mentioned above were revisited for this project for a fresh enquiry on consumer expenditure. Broadly speaking, NSS schedule (Sch. L0) and methodology was followed. In fact, retired NSS field workers were employed for the job with a view to eliminating interviewer effects to the extent possible. In view of resource constraints for the resurvey project and also anticipating that only a moderate-sized sample would prove to be adequate, a randomly chosen subset of the original sample was actually covered in the resurvey. The sample size came to 790 households in 67 villages taking the three districts together. The 27th round enquiry was conducted in the form of four quarterly (season-wise) subrounds. The fieldwork of the resurvey was conducted during July 1985-June 1986,

taking care to see that each household was revisited in the same season (subround of the resurvey) as the corresponding household in the 27th round enquiry.<sup>1</sup>

Before we discuss the findings of the resurvey, we may briefly report the experience gained in regard to changes in and traceability of households in the NSS 27th round sample after the lapse of 13 years. Out of 677 households in the NSS sample intended to be revisited, 498 were found unchanged, except for changes through births, deaths, etc. 17 of these had been extinct through death and 49 had left the village during the intervening period. As many as 160 households of the original sample had been split forming 382 households and 24 of them had left the village before the time of the resurvey. An additional 18 households of the original sample could not be traced. In general, no attempt was made to cover

households (or fragments of households) that had left the village. In sum, 677 households of the original sample had given rise to 882 households in 1985-86 (leaving out those that had become extinct through death), and of these 790 were resurveyed. Thus, about 10 per cent of the intended sample was missed mainly because of out-migration from the village. No attempt was also made to cover households that had come into the village after 1972-73.

### Results

We may now examine the data on private (household) consumption with a view to assessing the changes in different components of household consumption between 1972-73 and 1985-86. Tables 1 to 3 present comparative estimates for consumption during NSS 27th round and during the resurvey based on the sample actually covered in the

TABLE 1: AVERAGE PER CAPITA CONSUMPTION OF CEREALS PER 30 DAYS IN PHYSICAL TERMS DURING NSS 27TH ROUND (1972-73) AND RESURVEY (1985-86) IN RURAL AREAS BY DISTRICTS

District	No of Sample Households		Average Cereals Consumption Per Person Per 30 Days (kg)	
	NSS 27th Round	Resurvey	NSS 27th Round	Resurvey
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Bardhaman	350	382	14.58	14.26
Birbhum	165	199	15.05	14.23
Purulia	162	209	13.83	14.68
Total	677	790	14.43	14.42

TABLE 2: AVERAGE PER CAPITA CONSUMPTION PER 30 DAYS OF SELECTED NON-CEREAL ITEMS IN PHYSICAL TERMS DURING NSS 27TH ROUND (1972-73) AND RESURVEY (1985-86) IN RURAL AREAS BY DISTRICTS

Item (Unit)	Bardhaman		Birbhum		Purulia		Total	
	1972-73	1985-86	1972-73	1985-86	1972-73	1985-86	1972-73	1985-86
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Pulses (kg)	0.47	0.44	0.40	0.30	0.15	0.32	0.33	0.36
Milk (litre)	1.26	1.42	1.30	1.48	0.35	1.96	0.93	1.65
Meat (kg)	0.11	0.09	0.08	0.08	0.02	0.03	0.07	0.06
Egg (no)	0.45	0.43	1.03	0.32	0.14	0.21	0.50	0.31
Fish (fresh) (kg)	0.28	0.35	0.28	0.29	0.11	0.22	0.22	0.28
Potato (kg)	1.99	1.85	1.09	1.23	0.52	0.60	1.17	1.17
Sugar (kg)	0.23	0.31	0.18	0.34	0.11	0.21	0.17	0.32
Gut (cane) (kg)	0.43	0.13	0.61	0.25	0.03	0.04	0.33	0.13
No of sample households	350	382	165	199	162	209	677	790

TABLE 3: AVERAGE PER CAPITA VALUE OF CONSUMPTION OF SELECTED NON-FOOD ITEMS PER 30 DAYS DURING NSS 27TH ROUND (1972-73) AND RESURVEY (1985-86) IN RURAL AREAS BY DISTRICTS

Items	Bardhaman		Birbhum		Purulia		Total	
	1972-73	1985-86*	1972-73	1985-86*	1972-73	1985-86*	1972-73	1985-86*
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Clothing	2.32	2.57	1.56	3.40	1.01	2.32	1.60	2.70
Footwear	0.08	0.10	0.01	0.07	0.00	0.20	0.03	0.13
Education	0.64	0.42	0.40	0.05	0.18	0.11	0.40	0.19
Medicine	0.77	1.19	0.46	0.09	0.06	0.11	0.41	0.45
Doctor, nurse, etc	0.07	0.13	0.04	0.01	0.00	0.03	0.04	0.05
Conveyance	0.43	0.34	0.24	0.07	0.19	0.19	0.28	0.20
Durable goods	0.43	0.26	0.20	0.86	0.06	0.19	0.22	0.40
Total	4.73	5.02	2.91	4.54	1.50	3.13	2.98	4.12

Note: \* The figures for 1985-86 have been deflated to express them at NSS 27th round (1972-73) prices. See text.

resurvey. Design-based multipliers or probability weights were used for arriving at these estimates.

Table 1 relates to physical consumption of cereal items—rice, wheat, etc., and their products. This is known to be one of the crucial indicators of level of living in rural India. It appears that, on the whole, per capita consumption of cereals (quantity) did not increase or decrease perceptibly between the two periods.

Table 2 is parallel to table 1 and covers quantitative consumption of major food items other than cereals. Here again the overall picture is one of stagnation in consumption standards over time. Sugar seems to show a rising trend, but gur (cane) shows the opposite, and the sum of the two shows no definite change. The observed rise for milk is mainly due to a steep rise for Purulia and this finding is rather dubious.

The district of Bardhaman is known to have prospered most through the green revolution between 1972-73 and 1985-86 and the district of Purulia, the least. But tables 1 and 2 suggest that improvements in household consumption, if any, had occurred only in the district of Purulia. This requires further probing. However, even after some upward rise the level of consumption remains abysmally low in absolute terms.

We finally come to table 3 which covers selected items of the non-food group. Only value figures are available for comparison and so a rough adjustment has been made for price rise over time. The average value of the monthly CPI numbers for agricultural labourers (base = July 1960-June 1961) in West Bengal was 223 for the NSS 27th round period and 563 for the resurvey period. The latter figure is 2.523 times the former. The figures for the resurvey presented in table 3 were obtained by dividing the corresponding figures at current (1985-86) prices by 2.523. It should be appreciated that this is only a rough correction for inter-temporal price variation, in the absence of more appropriate item-specific and region-specific price indices.

It appears from table 3 that there was a mild improvement in the consumption of non-food items as a whole between the two periods. The improvement is noticeable for

clothing and footwear and also for durables, but the districtwise picture is far from uniform. There was no rise for medicine, and for education, which is provided free to a large extent, expenditure actually fell.<sup>4</sup> Anyway, the rise in non-food consumption while food consumption stagnated was presumably due to the demonstration effect caused by urbanisation and the mass media and the wider availability of various goods.

To conclude, the comparisons between resurvey data and NSS 27th round data reveal that there was little change in consumption standards for the food component of household consumption and only a mild improvement in the non-food part of it. Absolute levels of household consumption re-

mained nearly as dismal in 1985-86 as in 1972-73. In later communications we propose to report on the changes in living standards that occurred for different sections of the population. It is possible that even the mild improvements in non-food consumption affected only the upper strata of the rural population.<sup>5</sup>

#### Notes

- 1 Aspects like morbidity and mortality, terms and conditions of work, securities, loans and recreation were excluded from the scope of the study.
- 2 The plan of the resurvey relating to other aspects of level of living will be outlined in a later communication.
- 3 For reasons of space, we do not present half-samplewise results which indicate the margin of uncertainty associated with the combined sample estimates presented here. These and subroundwise (i.e., seasonwise) results generally support the conclusions recorded at different places of this paper.
- 4 Estimates in table 3 are particularly affected by sampling errors, because expenditure on items like clothings and durables are rather lumpy and infrequent. Inter-district variation points to this lack of reliability.
- 5 The authors are thankful to the authorities of the NSSO, government of India, for supplying them original lists of households and enquiry schedules needed for the resurvey of NSS villages and households.

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