

ABSTRACT

Nutritional Norms, Poverty Lines and Consumption Behaviour: Some Reflections on Poverty Measurement and Intervention Strategies in India

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The poverty lines used in India are explicitly based on the actual consumption of a minimum number of calories, which is a proxy for nutritional adequacy, in 1973-74. Both the current relevance and normative basis of the poverty lines have come under attack in recent years. This paper examines the recent National Sample Survey (NSS) data on household expenditures and calorie intake in light of these criticisms. It is argued that although the actual calorie intake of the poor has reduced significantly over the years, there is no compelling proof to indicate that the poverty lines have become dysfunctional and need to be changed at this stage. However, there have been fairly dramatic changes in the consumption behaviour of the poverty-line class in all states and in both rural and urban areas. In particular, it is found that the calorie-intensity of the food baskets consumed by the poor have reduced substantially, which is an indicator of a shift to a higher quality food basket. Whether this lower calorie/higher quality food basket is likely to yield better health outcomes on nutritional grounds is an issue of further research. The paper also points out some interesting aspects of the consumption behaviour of the poor and examines their implication for the poverty reduction strategy followed in the country.

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