

Changes in Level of Living in Rural West Bengal Perceptions of the People

Nikhilesh Bhattacharya
Manabendu Chattopadhyay
Ashok Rudra

This paper is the fifth of a series reporting the results of a resurvey of villages and households carried out in 1985-86 in three districts of West Bengal—Bardhaman, Birbhum and Purulia—that had been covered in the 27th and 28th rounds of the NSS during 1972-74. The findings reported in the earlier papers covered several aspects of the people's level of living—private consumption, social consumption, housing conditions and stocks of consumer durables. The present paper presents a summary of the people's responses to questions on their own perceptions of changes in different dimensions of their level of living.

IN our earlier communications (*vide* references at the end), we have reported the results of a resurvey of villages and households carried out in 1985-86 in rural areas of three districts of West Bengal—Bardhaman, Birbhum and Purulia—that had been covered in the 27th and 28th rounds of the NSS during 1972-74. Our findings reported in the earlier communications cover several aspects of level of living—private consumption, social consumption, housing conditions and stocks of consumer durables. In the present communication we present a summary of people's responses to questions on their own perceptions of changes in different dimensions of level of living. Broadly speaking, people's perceptions are in agreement with the facts elicited from them through interviews during the NSS enquiries and during the resurvey. There are, however, differences in details.

THE SURVEY DESIGN

Details of the survey design were presented in the first two communications. One component of the resurvey was a resurvey of households covered for the NSS 27th round enquiry on consumer expenditure. This covered 67 villages and 790 households and aimed at collecting data on current levels of private consumption. The other component was a resurvey of villages and households covered for the NSS 28th round enquiry on housing conditions. This covered 72 villages and 1153 households. Data were collected on infrastructural facilities in these villages through a village schedule. The household schedule canvassed in this part of the resurvey included information on housing conditions including drinking water facilities needed for a study of inter-temporal changes; it also contained blocks for recording data on stocks of consumer durables and of clothing and footwear and on changes therein during a specified number of years.

A block was added to the household schedule canvassed in each component of the resurvey for collecting information on the perceptions of the sample households themselves regarding changes in their level of living during the period of ten years preceding the resurvey. Questions were asked

separately for each of ten aspects or dimensions of level of living (*vide* Table 1). For each question again, the informant (usually the head of the household) was asked to state his or her perception of changes in living standards (i) of his or her household and (ii) also separately, of the general population of the village. The two sets of responses, (i) and (ii), are summarised here. This is done separately for the NSS 27th round households and the NSS 28th round households. The results for these two sets of households naturally differ to some extent because of sampling error. It is also possible that the responses were affected by the programmes of collecting factual data on different aspects of level of living and these programmes, as noted above, were different for the two sets of households.

PERCEPTIONS OF CHANGE

Table 1 presents a summary of the perceptions of sample respondents. To save space, we refrain from reporting the percentages of respondents whose responses were 'no change' or 'no opinion'. The percentages for 'rise' and 'fall' do not naturally add upto 100.

As could be expected from our earlier results, especially those on social consumption, the responses were positive as regards facilities for drinking water, medical care,

education, 'roads and transport' and 'recreation and culture'. Typically, 60 to 80 per cent of the households had felt that their living standards had gone up during the last 10 years in regard to each of these aspects of level of living. Against this, less than 10 per cent of the households reported perception of deterioration for most of these aspects; however, for drinking water this percentage was 19 from the resurvey of NSS 27th round households. At the lowest end of the list, are sightseeing and pilgrimage and sanitation/drainage, especially the latter. Few households had perceived either rise or fall in living standards in these respects; the overwhelming majority of responses were 'no change' or 'no opinion'.

Aspects numbered 1 to 3 (i.e., food consumption, clothing and footwear consumption and consumption of durables) in Table 1 seem to occupy an intermediate position. About 50 to 60 per cent of the households felt that their living standards had gone up while about 20 to 25 per cent of them perceived some lowering of standards in respect of domestic consumption of food and of clothing and footwear and also the stocks of consumer durables in the household.

The overall perception of improvement in food consumption is somewhat in variance with the relative stagnation in food consumption reported in the first communica-

TABLE 1: PERCENTAGE OF SAMPLE HOUSEHOLDS REPORTING RISE OR FALL IN LEVEL OF LIVING DURING THE LAST TEN YEARS IN RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS ON THEIR OWN PERCEPTIONS OF CHANGES

Aspect (1)	Resurvey of Domestic Consumption (790 Hhs)				Resurvey of Housing Conditions, etc (1153 Hhs)			
	Own Hh		General Population		Own Hh		General Population	
	Rise (2)	Fall (3)	Rise (4)	Fall (5)	Rise (6)	Fall (7)	Rise (8)	Fall (9)
(1) Food consumption	65	21	85	2	50	29	69	4
(2) Clothing and footwear consumption	62	19	85	1	48	25	70	3
(3) Consumption of durables	54	22	79	0.8	40	22	62	3
(4) Drinking water facilities	71	19	73	19	81	7	84	6
(5) Sanitation/drainage	1	0.6	3	0.9	6	0.2	14	0.2
(6) Medical care facilities	59	7	60	7	60	4	60	4
(7) Educational facilities	68	0	76	0.5	60	0.4	74	2
(8) Roads and transport facilities	72	8	72	8	70	0.5	72	1
(9) Recreational/cultural facilities	49	2	68	2	44	0.6	63	0.6
(10) Sightseeing/pilgrimage facilities	12	0	17	0	8	0.1	17	0

tion of this series based on quantitative data on food consumption collected in NSS 27th round and in the resurvey. This discrepancy is being examined carefully. In all other respects, the data on perceptions are in broad agreement with the quantitative data on consumption, stocks of consumer durables, infrastructural facilities, etc.

It is interesting to compare the respondents' perceptions relating to their own households and to the general population in the village. For items of social consumption, like drinking water, medical care, roads/transport, and sanitation/drainage, the percentage distribution of responses is nearly the same for 'own household' and for 'general population'. This is presumably because the access to these facilities is relatively equal for different sections of the rural population. The improvements seem to have been slightly greater for the general

population than for the sample households in respect of education and for recreation/culture probably because the poorest households might have failed to utilise the facilities that had been created during the ten-year period. For food consumption, consumption of clothing and footwear and consumption of durables, the difference was quite clear—about 20 per cent of the households felt that while their own living standards had not gone up, others in the village had prospered during the ten-year period under reference.

REASONS FOR CHANGES

Each informant was requested to state why he felt that his living standard or that of the general population had changed for the better or worse. Various explanations were offered. These were naturally different for the ten aspects listed in Table 1. A brief summary of these reasons is presented in

Table 2. This table has 10 parts or sub-tables, one for each aspect of level of living. For each aspect, the reasons given have been suitably grouped for considerations of space. No reasons were offered in many cases where the response was 'no change' or 'no opinion'. On the other hand, more than one reason was given in a few cases. Thus, the total of the percentages for different types of reasons may be above or below 100.

For food consumption, consumption of clothing and footwear and stocks of consumer durables, the main reason for improvement or worsening was the perceived rise or fall in real income. The improvement in the supply of drinking water was mainly ascribed to additional tubewells and wells, especially the former. In a good number of cases, however, wells and tubewells had gone out of use. Very little had happened in the sphere of sanitation and drainage facilities.

TABLE 2: PERCENTAGE OF SAMPLE HOUSEHOLDS OFFERING DIFFERENT REASONS (EXPLANATIONS) FOR PERCEIVED RISE OR FALL IN LEVEL OF LIVING DURING THE LAST TEN YEARS

Reasons	Resurvey of Domestic Consumption (790 Hhs)		Resurvey of Housing Condition, etc (1153 Hhs)		Reasons	Resurvey of Domestic Consumption (790 Hhs)		Resurvey of Housing Condition, etc (1153 Hhs)	
	Own Hh	General Population	Own Hh	General Population		Own Hh	General Population	Own Hh	General Population
(1) Domestic consumption of food									
(1) Rise in (real) income	74	97	50	77	(3) -do- reduced	7	7	4	4
(2) Fall in (real) income	21	1	27	4	(4) Other reasons	2	2	3	3
(3) Other reasons	12	0.3	11	2	(5) No opinion/no response	29	29	31	31
(4) No opinion/no response	8	9	14	20	(7) Facilities of education				
(2) Domestic consumption of clothing and footwear									
(1) Rise in (real) income	71	82	46	73	(1) Primary school nearer than before	28	33	17	21
(2) Fall in (real) income	19	1	24	4	(2) Middle/UP/high school nearer than before	27	27	22	28
(3) Other reasons	18	6	11	2	(3) High school/college nearer than before	4	5	6	6
(4) No opinion/no response	12	11	19	21	(4) Pre-existing institution strengthened	12	14	10	13
(3) Stocks of consumer durables									
(1) Rise in (real) income	64	94	43	68	(5) -do- weakened	2	3	2	2
(2) Fall in (real) income	24	1	23	3	(6) No opinion/no response	26	20	31	22
(3) Other reasons	15	3	8	2	(8) Roads and transport facilities				
(4) No opinion/no response	13	13	23	25	(1) Roads built/improved	28	28	22	22
(4) Facilities of drinking water									
(1) Additional wells/ tubewells dug/sunk	53	58	66	69	(2) No of buses increased	40	40	41	42
(2) Tap water arranged	7	9	4	4	(3) Railway facilities improved	10	12	6	6
(3) Existing wells/tubewells repaired/renovated	1	1	2	2	(4) Other reasons (for deterioration)	13	15	0.2	0.2
(4) Some wells/tubewells gone out of use or become dry in off-seasons	31	30	7	7	(5) No opinion/no response	15	15	22	20
(5) No opinion/no response	6	4	6	4	(9) Recreation and cultural facilities				
(5) Sanitation and drainage arrangements									
(1) New public latrines constructed	0.5	3	2	9	(1) Library set up/improved	16	17	15	14
(2) Household latrine constructed/improved	0.2	0	0	0.2	(2) More private/community radios	21	38	21	40
(3) New drainage constructed	0	0	2	2	(3) Cinema house nearer than before	5	4	3	5
(4) Old drainage constructed	0.4	0.4	2	2	(4) More frequent <i>jatra</i> performances	4	6	9	12
(5) No opinion/no response	75	73	70	62	(5) Other reasons (for deterioration)	2	3	0.3	0.3
(6) Facilities of medical care									
(1) Hospital/PHC nearer than before	17	17	21	22	(6) No opinion/no response	37	23	38	22
(2) Staff of pre-existing institution strengthened	26	27	22	22	(10) Facilities for sightseeing, pilgrimage, etc				
					(1) Rise in (real) income	5	5	5	9
					(2) Fall in (real) income	0	0	0.1	0
					(3) Improved facilities for travelling	2	3	2	5
					(4) No opinion/no response	69	70	69	63

Improvements in medical facilities had come about partly because new medical care institutions had been set up nearer and partly because the number of doctors, nurses, etc. in the pre-existing institutions had been increased. The improvement of educational facilities had come through the establishment of new institutions (mainly primary and high schools) being set up nearer than before. Improvements in roads and transport facilities had occurred mainly through increases in the number of buses plying. Construction of new roads, improvements of pre-existing roads and of nearest railway facilities had also contributed in good many cases. Recreational and cultural facilities had expanded markedly through increase in the number of radios—private or community owned—in the village. Setting up and strengthening of libraries and more frequent extra performances were also cited as important factors. Changes in facilities for tours for sightseeing, etc. did not seem to have made any marked impressions; most of the respondents did not offer any reason for the changes in this respect. Increased real income and improved facilities for travelling

were mentioned in a small proportion of cases.

[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.]

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