

Jairam: Why pick holes rather than celebrating drop in poverty?

"We are the only country where vested interests want to keep the figures high"

Special Correspondent

NEW DELHI: Even as the Centre is trying to find a face-saving solution to the issue of embarrassing poverty estimates put out by the Planning Commission, Union Minister for Rural Development Jairam Ramesh on Sunday wondered why people were picking holes instead of celebrating the fact that the number of people living below the poverty line had come down.

"We are the only country in the world where vested interests want to keep the poverty number at a high level," he

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told journalists here.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh announced the decision to have the poverty estimates measured by a technical committee after a furore over the Commission's estimate for 2009-10 that said those having a daily expenditure of Rs. 28.65 in urban areas and Rs. 22.43 in rural areas would be

deemed above the poverty line.

Assailing the present debate, Mr. Ramesh said it was on measuring poverty rather than doing anything about it. "The issue had been trivialised." India was a pioneer in poverty measurement, starting with Pitambar Pant's exercise in 1962, and the

methodology had been refined over the years, he said.

No one could deny that poverty had come down. There were multiple ways of measuring poverty and what was needed was to do something about it rather than split hairs.

The Minister said the States had a vested interest in inflating poverty figures – to derive as much Central transfer of funds as possible.

It was desirable to have a universal social welfare programme but given the population size it was simply not possible fiscally to extend welfare schemes to all. There had

to be some process to choose who needed to be taken care of. The best exercise was the automatic exclusion system, adopted in the socio-economic and caste census which provided for the exclusion criteria.

It was a relatively easy methodology to exclude people and then cover the rest of the population within the social welfare net and ensure them better living standards.

Mr. Ramesh wondered why government employees and taxpayers should be entitled to government's social welfare programmes.