



INFOCHANGE

agenda

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**Food security
The big challenge of
the new millennium**

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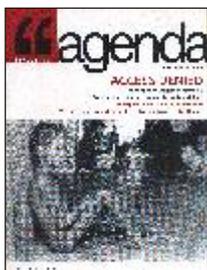
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Increasing food insecurity in South Asia

South Asian nations have transformed from food-deficit countries in the 1960s and '70s to food-surplus countries in the 1980s and '90s. And yet, food insecurity and under-nutrition remain huge problems. How is this paradox to be explained?

JAYATI GHOSH

One of the most significant forms of material insecurity in South Asia is still food insecurity. It remains a major policy challenge, despite the fact that food production has increased (but at a declining rate) in all the countries of South Asia and these countries do not face an aggregate shortage at a macro level.

The table below shows that South Asian countries have been exporting some amount of food. The balance for 2002 is positive in all countries except Bangladesh. These countries have transformed from food deficit countries in the 1960s and 1970s to food surplus countries in the 1980s and 1990s. However, increased food production has not generated greater household and individual food security for significant sections of the population.

Country	Food Production	Food Exports	Food Imports	Food Balance
Bangladesh	26,924	1.6	2,827	-4,601
India	1,74,655	9,490	56	23,826
Nepal	5,839	11	39	57
Pakistan	24,936	2,966	288	3,818
Sri Lanka	1,938	9.8	1,307	252

Source: FAO, 2004. Figures in thousand metric tones for

Across the region, there is evidence of inadequate nutrition and food insecurity, reflected most starkly in declining per capita calorie consumption among the poorest quartile of the population. Per capita foodgrain consumption in India declined from 476 grams per day in 1990 to only 418 grams per day in 2001. Aggregate calorific consumption per capita declined from just over 2,200 calories per day in 1987-88 to about 2,150 in 1999-2000, according to National Sample Survey data.

Nutritional deficiencies remain huge at least half the children in India (and possibly more in Pakistan) are born with protein deficiency. Anaemia and iron deficiency are also widespread and continue to be severe problems. World Bank estimates show that about 35% of the population is chronically undernourished in Bangladesh followed by 25% in India, 20% in Nepal and Pakistan and 25% in Sri Lanka.

What is worse is that there has been little change in the prevalence of under-nutrition in South Asian countries from the early-1990s through the late-1990s. If anything, the level of food insecurity has worsened slightly during the 1990s. This situation is unlike other parts of the developing world such as China, Indonesia, Malawi and Kenya, all of which have achieved

a more than 25% reduction in the level of under-nourishment during the last decade.

Two policy-related forces have played a substantial and indirect role in declining food security: the agrarian crisis and an inadequate generation of employment. Both have meant that patterns of change in purchasing power have not brought about better food security.

Misguided policies have also directly damaged food security in India since the mid-1990s. Attempts to reduce the central government's food subsidy by increasing the price of food in the public distribution system led to declining sales and excess holding of food stocks. This meant more losses and a larger level of food subsidy, even as more people in the country went hungry. Ultimately studies have shown several million tonnes of foodgrain were exported at ridiculously low prices despite widespread hunger and malnutrition in the country.

A loss of livelihood is typically the key shock factor that generates a process that culminates in greater hunger and malnourishment in South Asia. This explains the coexistence of higher production and lower prices of food with the continued, widespread and even increasing incidence of hunger. As world trade prices of food have fallen, incomes of the poor (especially the rural poor) in most parts of South Asia have fallen even further, reflecting the general stagnation of productive employment opportunities and the worsening of livelihood conditions.



Ironically, cultivators are suffering from the increase in food insecurity just as much as or even more than other groups. This is probably the most significant cause of the continued prevalence of widespread malnourishment. The macroeconomic causes of livelihood insecurity arise primarily from the effects of deregulating the market and reducing State expenditure processes that have marked the last decade-and-a-half across South Asia.

Land reforms and more equal property distribution remain the key to solving the structural problem of hunger. The more transient or temporary instances of hunger must also be dealt with through macroeconomic policies that firmly commit the government to a much greater degree of involvement, investment and regulation.

Unfortunately, governments in South Asia do not seem to be determined to address this issue, which should be top priority. Even in countries with previously developed public distribution systems for food such as India, policies continue to seriously undermine structures that were beneficial to the public. This leaves the field open for private players, both national and international, to make food security an arena for profiteering. The goal of ensuring food security for all citizens must be put at the core of all political demands and strategies for positive social change.

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All you who sleep hungry tonight

Persistent food insecurity is not just related to economic barriers to access food, but also to social barriers. A silent daily tragedy plays out in many homes and streets in our country, where millions go to sleep hungry. Women are likely to eat less in many families, and dalits face discrimination even in schemes like mid-day meals and the PDS. The discourse on starvation must shift from people dying of starvation to the socially-marginalised groups that are living with it

HARSH MANDER

Large-scale famines have been overcome in contemporary India. The calamitous decimation of enormous numbers of people because they are denied access even to the minimum food necessary for bare survival, has mercifully passed into the pages of history. In the early years after Independence, a dramatic level of food insecurity, leading to famine and acute starvation, loomed perilously over millions of Indians. This was the result of a low level of production in an agricultural system that was inordinately dependent on a capricious monsoon, and extremely unequal distribution of land and food. With some land reforms, enhanced foodgrain production and improved distribution through the Public Distribution System, this danger substantially receded.

However, the battle has by no means been won. Public pressure and State action have not succeeded in overcoming hunger or the endemic denial of adequate nutrition. Many individuals, families and communities, in both villages and cities, continue to struggle with hunger, which for them is a way of life. They are usually people from the unorganised sector, such as landless workers and artisans, socially oppressed groups like dalits and adivasis, single women-headed households, destitute persons, persons with disabilities, old people without care-givers, migrant workers, urban street children and others. A silent daily tragedy continues to play out in many homes and streets in our country, where millions of people sleep hungry.

The persistence of malnutrition is acknowledged, to some degree, by policymakers in India, and addressed imperfectly, but absolute hunger or endemic starvation are far less accepted, studied or addressed. Attempts to enhance food security at the household level by targeted anti-poverty wage and credit programmes, and subsidised foodgrain from the PDS, bridged the unmet food needs of millions, to some extent. These attempts however did not touch intra-family inequities in access to food or strengthen the crumbling livelihoods of the poor. Hunger and starvation continue to lurk in the shadows.

When large numbers of people die of starvation, it occasionally captures the media's attention and there is transient public outrage. Government officials in every part of the country then hotly deny the existence of chronic hunger and deaths due to starvation. They claim that the deaths result from illness; some even quibble that people were just chronically malnourished, but not starving. I am unable to tell the difference.

The invisibility of starvation and destitution in the debates about

food security derives in part from the problematic and narrow definition of starvation. Few people die directly and exclusively of starvation. They live with severe food deficits for long periods, and tend to succumb to diseases that they would have survived if they were well nourished. The government does not recognise these as conditions of starvation and insists that the deaths were caused by the proximate precipitating factor of infection.

Indian as well as international agencies typically do not keep records of the numbers of people living with or dying of starvation. The same denial underlines the work of official research agencies. India's government agencies at both the central and state levels seem to have trouble seeing the massive hunger that characterises the country. Highly technical research on nutrients often avoids facing the problem, which is deeply political, not technical. There is no hope of solving the problem of hunger if the Indian state refuses to see the acute distress.

We have to extrapolate from data to assess the extent of hunger in India. UNICEF estimates that in the year 2000, about 2,420,000 children in India died before reaching the age of five. It estimates that about half of these deaths of children under five are associated with malnutrition. We can thus estimate that more than a million children die in India each year from causes associated with malnutrition.

The number of adults who live and die under conditions of starvation is relatively unknown. The Planning Commission estimates that 8% of Indians do not get two adequate meals a day and in some pockets severe under-nutrition takes a toll. One estimate says that more than 200 million people go hungry and about 50 million are on the brink of starvation. The Food Insecurity Atlas of Urban India (2004) published by the MS Swaminathan Research Foundation and the World Food Programme, found that average urban calorie intake is lower than average rural calorie intake, and that average calorie intake has marginally declined in rural and urban areas in the last three decades.

Official denials and petty technicalities cannot obscure the abiding shame of hunger-related deaths recurring in a country that produces enough grain to feed every Indian. Divergent interests may jostle for priority in public expenditure and resources in India. But it is difficult to imagine any responsibility of the State that is greater than ensuring that every person has access to the food necessary for survival, growth, health and

well-being.

The feminisation of hunger

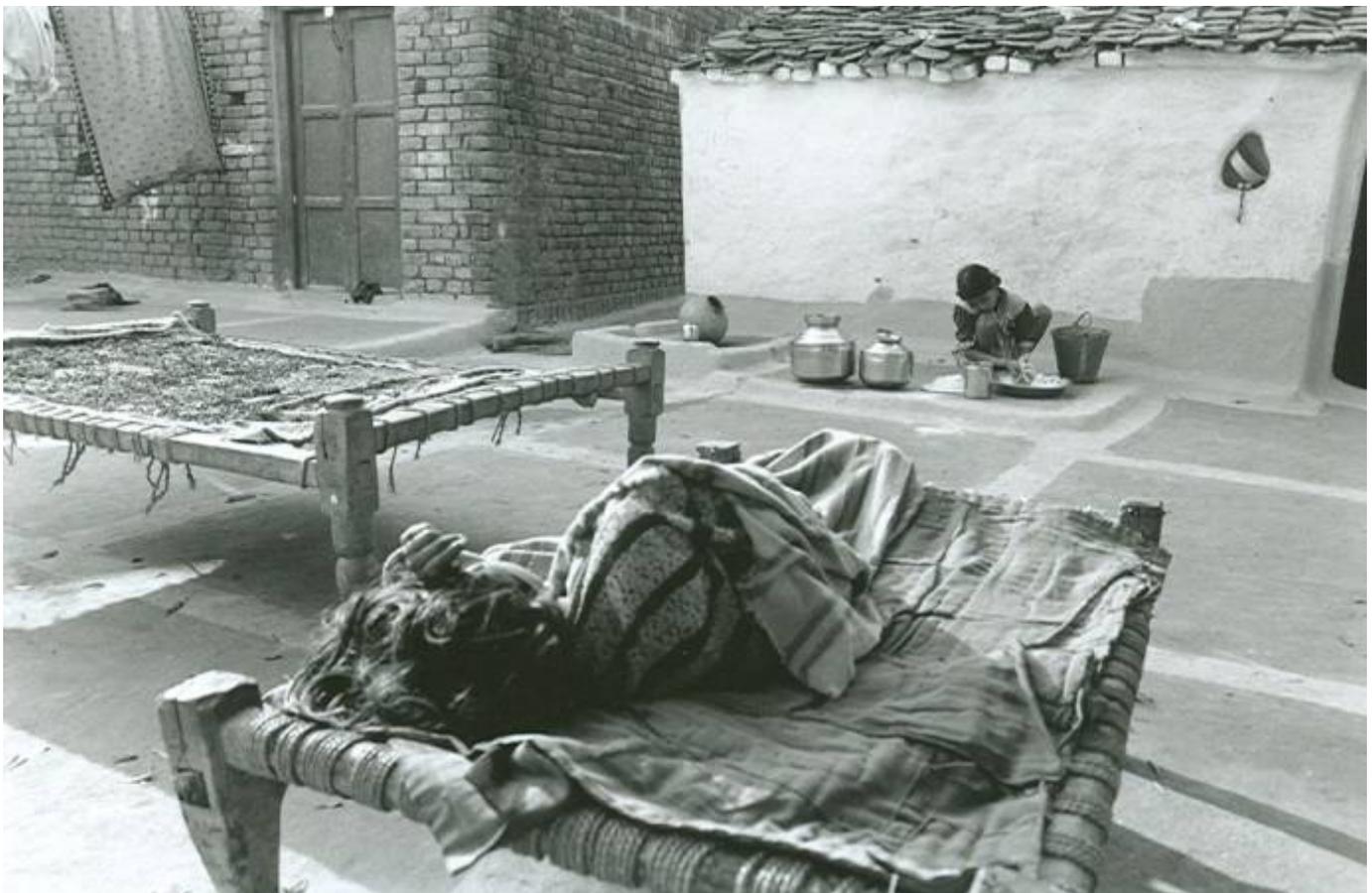
The fragile livelihood options of both the rural and urban people have grave implications for their food security. However, it is important to note that economic barriers to access to food exist along with social barriers. Gender inequalities in South Asia are the single most important social barrier. The adverse and declining sex ratio in India at 927 females per 1,000 males is, to a major extent, the outcome of the deep-rooted structural denial to girls and women of their equal rights to food and healthcare. Many micro-studies confirm the persistence of intra-family inequities; women not only eat the least and last, but in situations of absolute household food insecurity they may not eat at all.

This means not just a feminisation of poverty, but also of hunger. Women bear a disproportionately large part of the cruel burden of hunger. This is particularly ironical because women play a major role in ensuring the food security of their households by procuring, storing and cooking food not just for children but also for all members of the family. Their capacity to fulfil this role is hampered by other responsibilities, such as collecting fuel and water, which in turn has implications for household food insecurity.

Inadequate food often requires women to also seek

employment for wages. Their infants, often left with younger siblings, are denied regular breast-feeding and exposed to unhygienic food and infections. Studies (such as Lisa Smith's 'The importance of women's status for child nutrition in developing countries'; IFPRI) have shown that more income in the hands of women tends to lead to higher nutrition for children. However, women who are themselves trapped in poor nutrition and health, have to secure the nutrition and health of their families, which they frequently do at the cost of their own health and nutrition.

Access to food in female-headed households is even more threatened. Pradeep Kumar Panda writes (in a 1997 book titled *Female Headship, Poverty and Child Welfare: A Study of Rural Orissa*, published by the Centre For Development Studies in Trivandrum), "Poverty and female headship are strongly linked in rural Orissa, India. For example, if we draw a poverty line that corresponds to 15% of the population who are poor, 12% of people living in male-headed households are poor as compared with 33% of people living in female-headed households. Labour force participation data indicate that female heads are more likely to work in the marketplace than women who are spouses of male heads of household. The differences are large: on average 74% versus 54%. The comparison of household expenditures indicates that female-headed households spend relatively less



on higher quality food items such as meat, vegetables, milk and other dairy products. However, there is some evidence that they spend less on personal consumption such as alcoholic beverages. Overall, the differences are pronounced between these households. Finally, the findings show that children in female-headed households are disadvantaged both in terms of access to social services and actual welfare outcomes.”

The government's food schemes are remarkably blind to gender barriers to food. The design of various programmes resolutely neglects the consequence of intra-family inequities. The ICDS (Integrated Child Development Services) in most parts of the country supplies weekly dry rations to expectant and lactating mothers. The fact that they collect the rations in large numbers is officially assumed to ensure better nutrition for women in the crucial child-bearing phase.

In my informal surveys in six states (Chhattisgarh, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh) I did not encounter a single woman recipient of the rations who said that the food exclusively or even predominantly augments her own nutrition. The food is added to the overall household food basket. The same rules apply as to all other food, and even the pregnant woman will eat only what is left after all other members of the family have eaten. The same may be said of the otherwise laudable National Maternity Benefit Scheme, which transfers Rs 500 to an expectant mother and fondly hopes that this will translate somehow into better nutrition for the mother.

It is also remarkable that the targeted food programmes only focus on women's reproductive function. Women are nutritionally deprived at all other stages of their life cycle, but only this phase seems to attract official attention, reflecting the patriarchal viewpoint that only sees women as producers of babies. These programmes stress nutritional support for pregnant women in order to secure the health of the baby. They do not speak of nutritional support for adolescent girls who will be mothers in the future. They do not speak of such support as an end in itself, as the woman's right to food.

Separate ration cards for women and men would be useful, so that the woman is able to access subsidised food even if the couple separates. Universal coverage under the Antyodaya scheme is imperative for all women-headed households. EGS and other employment programmes must ensure equal wages for women and men. They should also move beyond labour at public works to include a range of social tasks that are in conformity with women's skills and aspirations.

Women and women's organisations can be inducted to implement and monitor various food schemes. Self-help groups run by women have successfully piloted the production and distribution of mid-day meals and supplementary nutrition for small children in the ICDS. This can be extended to the PDS.

For a family living with absolute hunger, “nutrition-counselling” and the supplementary nutrition provided by the ICDS or mid-day meals can only touch the periphery of the crisis of a child's survival and health. As with starvation deaths, the ICDS intervenes only after the child shows symptoms of severe

malnutrition. The PDS is meaningless if a family or individual lack the economic means to purchase even subsidised food.

Schemes that are designed to provide some kind of social security cover to the most vulnerable social groups, such as old age pensions, and the Annapurna scheme for food for old people without care-givers, have not been strengthened. Few states have widow pension schemes, which must be implemented all over the country. The Antyodaya scheme for food allocations to the poorest families shows promise, but given the government's record of implementation, it may not amount to much.

Caste as a determinant of hunger

In addition to poverty and gender, many social barriers prevent people from securing their rights to food barriers of caste, tribe, disability, religion and stigma. People in these groups carry a disproportionate burden of poverty and thereby of hunger. They face barriers to access to food even if they have the economic means.

A recent study illustrates the nature of these barriers for dalits in accessing government food schemes. The study, titled 'Caste discrimination and food security programmes', was done by Sukhdeo Thorat and Joel Lee, and published in the Economic and Political Weekly in September 2005

The study found that mid-day meals served in “a locality non-threatening to dalits (a dalit colony as opposed to a dominant caste locality)” were at 12 and 19% respectively in Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu. The number was 47% in Andhra Pradesh. ICDS centres are located mainly in upper-caste settlements. This prompted the commissioners to recommend to the Supreme Court, in a writ petition filed by the PUCL (Peoples Union of Civil Liberties) in 2001, that SC/ST settlements should be given priority for future ICDS centres. The court accepted the recommendation. But more than a year after the order, the Sixth Report of the Commissioners speaks of failures by all the state governments to implement the order, or even to survey SC/ST settlements. The vast majority of dalit children must continue to enter an area of heightened vulnerability and tension to get their mid-day meal or supplementary nutrition under the ICDS.

As many as 52% of respondent villages in Rajasthan, 24% in Andhra Pradesh and 36% in Tamil Nadu (a three-state average of 37%) report problems of caste discrimination in the mid-day meals programmes. Up to 48.3% of villages report the dominant castes' opposition to dalit cooks. The second most common issue, at 31%, is segregated seating dalit children must sit apart from dominant caste children during the meal. A more intensified practice of segregation, by which dalits and dominant caste children are served entirely separate meals, is reported by 9.2% of respondent villages. And 9.2% report that teachers discriminate between students by giving inferior or insufficient food to dalit children. About 2.3% of the respondents identify other problems.

The opposition to dalit cooks manifests itself in many ways. When local administrators are putting the mid-day meal programme into place, dominant caste members intervene to

block the hiring of dalit cooks and instead favour dominant caste cooks. Where a dalit cook does get hired, dominant caste parents begin sending their children to school with home-packed lunch boxes or require their children to come home for lunch. In any event, the children are forbidden to eat food prepared by the dalit cook. In another strategy, dominant caste parents or community members pressure the local administration to dismiss the dalit cook on any pretext, and instead hire a dominant caste cook. Sometimes, dominant caste parents campaign to shut down the mid-day meal scheme in the village school. Some dominant caste parents react to the hiring of a dalit cook by withdrawing their child from the school and admitting the child to a school where the cook is not a dalit.

The 2003 survey involved formal interviews with the dalit communities of 531 villages in 30 districts in five states Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. It found that as a five-state average, 17% of villages have PDS shops in dalit colonies, while 70% have PDS shops located in dominant caste localities, and 13% of villages have PDS shops located elsewhere. As a five-state average, 40% of respondent villages report discrimination in quantity that is, dalits receive, for the same price, lesser quantities than the dominant castes from the PDS shopkeeper. Discrimination in price, where PDS dealers charge dalit customers extra for the same quantity of food that dominant castes purchase at a lower cost, is reported in 28% of respondent villages.

About 48% reported caste-based favouritism by the PDS dealer in distribution. In some places, PDS dealers service the dominant castes throughout the week, while only serving the dalit community on arbitrarily designated "dalit days" once or twice a week, often with reduced hours. A preferential order in service when dalits are kept waiting and served last while dominant caste members are immediately served is widely reported. In an average of 26% of the villages surveyed, PDS dealers practise 'untouchability' in the distribution of public goods to dalits. One such practice still in currency is the dominant castes dropping goods from above into cupped dalit hands below, so as to avoid the possibility of "polluting" contact. Other practices evidenced in the data include dominant caste PDS dealers in Bihar hanging cloth screens in front of their shops before dealing with Musahar dalits.

My own work with the survivors of the 2002 carnage in Gujarat, which took the lives of more than 2,000 Muslim men, women and children and rendered more than 200,000 homeless, highlights the intense food vulnerability of survivors of conflict and ethnic violence. Four years after the carnage, an estimated 70% of people have been unable to return to their original homes, blocked by threats, fear and economic boycott. Struggling without livelihoods in minimalist relief colonies, their physical survival and access to food remains intensely precarious.

The malaise of destitution

Whenever the media reports on 'starvation deaths', issues of

food security and hunger surface briefly in public consciousness. The short-lived public outrage that follows such reports invariably leads to unseemly wrangles about whether it was indeed a starvation death. This is followed by angry denials by officials, and postmortems and other evidence being mustered to establish that there was some food available to the family and this was not death due to starvation.

The discourse on starvation must shift from people dying of starvation to those who are living with it as a way of life. This is closely linked to the equally neglected reality of destitution. It is usually not recognised that death by starvation is only the outcome of the much more chronic, invisible, malaise of destitution. A large number of forgotten people live at the edge of survival. Each day comes with the fresh danger of one push that will hurtle them into the precipice. The problem of starvation and hunger can be overcome only when people who live in constant peril of slipping into starvation are protected from destitution. Arguable the first duty of any welfare state is to ensure an end to destitution.

Destitution lurks, sometimes visible, sometimes unseen, in every village and town. It is more endemic in certain social groups, such as women and girls, adivasis, people with disabilities, illnesses like leprosy, mental illness and HIV-AIDS, adults who are unable because of illness to earn a living, old people without care-givers, young children without adult protection, manual scavengers and bonded workers, among many others. A lot of empirical investigation is required into precisely which people, which social groups, in which circumstances, slip into destitution and why they reach this stage.

We have already commented on the inadequacy of state responses and schemes in preventing starvation. Apart from major leakage and corruption, the coverage of these schemes is meagre. They leave huge gaping holes in the social security net which large numbers of the most destitute slip through. Measures to prevent and reverse starvation or the persistence of absolute hunger are a duty not to the dead, but to the precariously living. It requires state action and public vigilance.

The right to food of all people cannot be met unless the government and people recognise the existence, scale and location of starvation and destitution and take the necessary measures. The state must introduce a sturdy universal security system for social groups that are most vulnerable to destitution and the consequent chronic hunger and starvation.

There may be many tangled questions about selection, distribution, corruption and monitoring, but our food resources are abundant. However, food security for all appears to be unlikely only because of the utter powerlessness, invisibility, political irrelevance and lack of organisation of the poorest and most deprived people of India. Social security in terms of food coverage for the most vulnerable social groups must not be left to the chance of executive discretion. It must be a legal entitlement, binding on every government. Only then will the enormous injustice, indignity and suffering associated with destitution be overcome.

Harsh Mander, a former civil servant and ex-Country Director of ActionAid India, is a writer and social activist

Why Karmeena Musahar died

Five children have died of hunger-related causes in the Musahar community of eastern UP since May 2006. Entire families in this and other communities in the state are starving. In addition to extreme poverty, the Musahars' low status in the caste hierarchy keeps them out of government food and employment schemes. As India claims to join the league of globalised nations, it cannot ignore these everyday realities of millions of its citizens

ANOSH MALEKAR

All was quiet when we reached the village. There was no visible sign of the death that had occurred the previous night. It was not the first time the predominantly upper-caste Thakur-Brahmin village of 6,000 people was witnessing a death in the tiny settlement of Musahars, a community that has unfortunately become known as the "rat-eaters".

Belwa is about 25 km from Varanasi in eastern Uttar Pradesh, on a flat land of mango groves and rice fields. The village is approached by an 8-km dust track off the Varanasi-Lucknow highway.

On August 31, 10-year-old Karmeena Musahar had come in the morning to the community centre and informal school run by a Varanasi-based NGO. That evening she ate some rice and vomited. She got a high fever and by 1 a m on September 1 she was dead. "She went peacefully," her grandmother, Hirawati, said.

Karmeena's father Buddiraj was away with the men in the community to perform the final rites when we got there around noon. Her grieving mother Badama spoke about their impoverished existence while feeding morsels of coarse rice to her surviving sons, four-year-old Monu and two-year-old Jadu.

There was little to eat in the house for three months. Buddiraj and Badama are bonded labourers on a brick kiln, which was closed for the monsoon. They had taken an advance of Rs 1,000 from the brick kiln owner, Ramashray Singh, the previous season and were struggling to pay back the last few instalments totalling Rs 300. The family was surviving on rice, grain chaff, salt and chillies.

The pradhan (village head), Rajendra Tiwari, said this was not unusual. The Musahars have always lived in abject poverty. "They are our praja (subjects) and but for our benevolence would all have died of hunger," he said magnanimously.

Karmeena is the fifth child in Belwa to die of hunger-related causes since May 2006. Nine-month-old Seema Musahar died on July 28 after desperate attempts by her mother Laxmi to get Rs 1,000 from the Varanasi district magistrate's emergency funds. Seema too had developed high fever and Laxmi had to pawn two old saris to get some money to treat her, which was not enough to save her.

Like most Musahar couples, Laxmi and her husband are bonded labourers at a brick kiln, drawing pitiful amounts of low-quality grain and chaff as payment. Laxmi's father Phoolchand also

recently died of starvation.

The Varanasi-based People's Vigilance Committee for Human Rights (PVCHR) and the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) have documented these deaths, along with those of Muneeb Musahar, a three-year-old boy of the same village who died on May 29, Monu Musahar, a one-year-old boy and a newborn baby girl, who died without a name.

The organisations wrote to the district and state authorities that at least 30 of the 100 Musahar families in Belwa were starving to death. Most of these families were cooking food only once a week. They had no access to foodgrain from the public distribution system or any of the government assistance programmes.

When no one responded, the PVCHR and AHRC wrote to the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) and the Planning Commission. The district administration moved only after the NHRC issued a notice seeking explanations for the hunger deaths. The Hong Kong-based AHRC wrote to the authorities in New Delhi and took the case of the starving Musahars to the United Nations (UN), the international media and other rights groups. It also demanded that the State Human Rights Commission in Uttar Pradesh conduct impartial inquiries into the starvation deaths.

Lenin Raghuvanshi of the PVCHR said the authorities are inactive and hostile because the village headman, the district magistrate and other functionaries are "caste-conscious feudalists with an interest in keeping the Musahars as social outcastes". When the DM, Rajeev Agarwal, finally visited Belwa, he only talked to the headman.

In a statement on July 27, the AHRC and PVCHR said, "India is trying to project itself as a State looking forward to a place in the league of developed nations. It has put a claim, as a leading Asian and global power, to permanent membership in the UN Security Council. However, the true measure of development is not economic growth: it is human dignity. By that measure India is among the least developed nations in the world."

High on hunger, low on development

One out of every three malnourished children in the world lives in India. As India claims to move towards becoming a global power, it has to face the fact that 46% of its under-three children are too small for their age. India has little chance of meeting a key United Nations Millennium Development Goal

that aims to halve the prevalence of underweight in pre-school children by 2015.

In 'India: Malnutrition Report' the World Bank observes that malnutrition in India is a concentrated phenomenon in five states and 50% of villages account for about 80% of the malnutrition cases. Half of the country's malnourished children live in rural areas. Boys and girls from the scheduled tribes account for 56.2% of the malnourished children. Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Bihar, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, all with a sizeable adivasi population, account for about 43% of India's hungry children.

The Musahar children would be among the 60 million malnourished children in India that another recent World Bank report titled 'India's Undernourished Children: A Call for Reform and Action', speaks of. They remain hungry in spite of the world's largest feeding programme for school children. Often the mid-day meal in school is the only meal that children like Karameena and Seema can get to eat all day.

Although the central government-sponsored mid-day meal scheme excludes children attending non-government aided schools, the programme, launched in August 2005, was expected to provide one cooked meal of 300 calories and 8-10 grams of protein content to about 12 crore children in more than 9 lakh primary schools across India.

The Musahars are recognised as a scheduled caste (SC). They survive on the margins of villages in isolated settlements. Their traditional occupation was hunting out rats from burrows in the fields. In return they were allowed to keep the grain and chaff



recovered from the rat holes. In times of drought and food scarcity, the Musahars would resort to eating rats. Many Musahar families work as bonded labourers at brick kilns.

The Musahars have mostly been denied the benefits of the government's food security and employment guarantee schemes. When they demand their rights, as they did in Varanasi district last year, the upper castes abused them and the official machinery said they were Naxalites.

In the eastern UP districts of Varanasi, Sonbhadra, Jaunpur, Khusinagar and Mirzapur, where Musahar deaths are frequently reported, only 31% of the children under-six years are covered by the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS), according to a study done by the PVCHR and based on the government's own figures. At least 71 ICDS projects in addition to the existing 64 are required to cover the entire Musahar population. Some 20% of the existing anganwadi worker posts and 30% of anganwadi helper's posts are vacant.

The PVCHR found that the five districts have utilised about 75% of the allocated funds and 56% of sanctioned foodgrains under the Sampoorna Gramin Rozgar Yojana. The National Food for Work scheme at Sonbhadra, Mirzapur and Khusinagar districts has only used 7.5% of funds and 8.6% of foodgrains so far.

The darkest of conditions

Deaths related to starvation have been reported in other very backward communities of Uttar Pradesh, like the Nuts, a community of alms-seekers, the Ghasias or grass cutters, and the Bankars or weavers. In the weavers' colony of Baghwa Nala in Varanasi, thousands of looms are lying idle because cheap Chinese yarn and silk fabric imports have deluged the Indian market. Scores of weavers who made the famous Banarasi silk saris are out of work and facing starvation.

The Human Resource Development Ministry recently underlined the need to broaden the mid-day meal scheme to include children from non-government aided schools. But state government officials often resist helping schools run by certain minority groups or allow the scheme to exclusively benefit certain caste groups. Antyodaya ration cards and cash compensations for hunger-related deaths come only after much hue and cry by human rights organisations.

The Musahars continue to be ignored in spite of the fact that parties with a backward caste base, like the Bahujan Samaj Party and the Samajwadi Party have been ruling the state in recent years. "The BSP cares only about Chamars, while the SP would not like to alienate its core constituency of other backward castes, who are the main exploiters of the Musahars," according to Raghuvanshi.

Union rural development minister Raghuvansh Pratap Singh visited Banthu village in Vaishali district of Bihar after 25 persons died of kala-azar (or 'black fever', a chronic and potentially fatal parasitic disease of the internal organs) in six months. Banthu has a sizeable Musahar population and is surrounded by a host of 'VIP constituencies' represented by Singh, Ram Vilas Paswan, George Fernandes and Rabri Dev.

"Kala-azar affects Musahars more than other communities because they are starving. The World Health Organisation has set 2015 for its eradication. But as long as the Musahars continue to face food scarcity I do not see any relief from kala-azar in north Bihar," said Reghupati (who is also Singh's brother) of the Delhi-based Confederation of NGOs of Rural India.

Fellow activist and Bihar Panchayat Helpline convener Amar Thakur said the current kala-azar eradication programme was so devised that the impoverished Musahar had to spend nearly Rs 2,000 on tests to confirm the disease before they could become eligible for free treatment. Bihar accounts for 90% of all kala-azar cases, which affect 19 districts and close to 2 lakh people. Cases are also reported in West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Assam, Tamil Nadu and Jammu and Kashmir, where migrant labourers appear to have carried the disease, said Thakur.

About 300 Musahar families live in Banthu. In January, two brothers in their 30s died of extended starvation and kala-azar. The deaths led to protests by Reghupati and fellow activists. The

district administration finally responded with Rs 25,000 cash compensation and a pucca house each for the widows, Sivanti Devi and Manju Devi, under the Indira Awaas Yojana.

The cash went into repaying old loans. There was little food to eat inside the pucca houses when we visited them in early-September. "We do not know how our children will survive the starvation after their fathers. Looking at how things have turned out for us, it is better if they never have to face such a future," the women said.

The Musahars live in dilapidated mud and straw huts surrounded by pools of stagnant water during the monsoon, which are a breeding ground for the sand fly that causes kala-azar. "People need food first before they can think of hygiene or proper housing or education," Reghupati said. "Dealing with kala-azar means dealing with poverty and hunger. Nobody wants to do that in these times of globalisation."

The working group on elementary education in Delhi, of which the mid-day meal is a part, is preparing a strategy for the Eleventh Plan (2007-12). Perhaps it will have spared a thought for India's 60 million hungry children before submitting its recommendations by the end of September. Otherwise, the government may have to think of more excuses for letting children starve to death.

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A hungry generation

Under-nutrition, low weight, chronic illness, stunted growth are widespread among children in India

Inadequate or unbalanced diets and chronic illness are associated with poor nutrition among children. Almost half the number of children under three years of age (47%) are underweight. A similar number (46%) are stunted. As many as 18% of children are severely undernourished in terms of weight-for-age and 23% according to height-for-age.

Even during the first six months of life, when most babies are breastfed, 9-15% of children are undernourished according to the three indices -- weight-for-age, height-for-age, and weight-for-height. At 2435 months, when most children have been weaned from breast milk, almost one-third are severely stunted and almost one-quarter are severely underweight.

'Wasting' affects 16% of children under three years of age in India. The proportion of children who are undernourished increases rapidly with the child's age through 12-23 months.

Overall, girls and boys are equally undernourished, but girls are more likely than boys to be underweight and stunted, whereas boys are more likely to be wasted. Under-nutrition generally increases with the birth order. Young children in families with six or more children are nutritionally the most disadvantaged. First births have lower than average levels of under-nutrition on almost all the measures, and children born after a short birth interval are more likely than other children to be stunted or underweight.

Under-nutrition is substantially higher in rural areas than in urban areas. Even in urban areas, more than one-third of children are underweight or stunted. Children whose mothers are illiterate are twice as likely to be undernourished as children whose mothers have completed at least high school. The differentials are greater in the case of severe under-nutrition.

The nutritional status of children is strongly related to the nutritional status of their mothers. Under-nutrition is more common for children of mothers whose height is less than 145 centimetres or whose body mass index is below 18.5.

All the measures of under-nutrition are strongly related to the standard of living. Children from households with a low standard of living are twice as likely to be undernourished as children from households with a high standard of living.

Hindu and Muslim children are equally likely to be undernourished, but Christian, Sikh and Jain children are considerably better nourished. Children from scheduled castes, scheduled tribes or other backward classes have relatively high levels of under-nutrition according to all measures. Children from scheduled tribes have the poorest nutritional status and a high prevalence of wasting (22%).

Inadequate nutrition is a problem throughout India, but the situation is considerably better in some states. Under-nutrition is most pronounced in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan. Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu are characterised by high levels of wasting among children. Nutritional problems are the least evident in Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, Goa, and Kerala. Even in these states, however, the levels of under-nutrition are unacceptably high.

Source: NFHS (National Family Health Survey) report

**MOHAN
GURUSWAMY
RONALD JOSEPH
ABRAHAM**

The poverty line is a starvation line

The poverty line in India measures only the most basic calorie intake, recording not nutrition but only the satiation of hunger. At present the poverty line stands at Rs 368 and Rs 559 per person per month for rural and urban areas, just about enough to buy 650 grams of foodgrains every day. A nutritious diet itself would cost around Rs 573 per capita per month, let alone the cost of securing other basic needs. When such an inclusive measure of poverty is used, as many as 68-84% of Indians would qualify as poor

"I have learnt to seek my happiness by limiting my desires rather than in attempting to satisfy them."

John Stuart Mill

When defining poverty in India, the Planning Commission seems to be taking J S Mill quite literally. For decades it has followed a limited definition of poverty. The official poverty line in India is based only on calories and accounts for little else but the satiation of hunger. It would have been more accurate to call it the "starvation line".

This limited definition has allowed successive governments to claim great achievements in the percentage reduction of poverty, though very little absolute reduction in the number of poor. Using an expanded definition that factors in other basic human needs, minimum living standards and access to public services, a majority of Indians are, in fact, still extremely poor.

How India defines poverty will determine the nature and content of public policy related to eliminating poverty. A discussion of the definition of poverty in India is also relevant to an international audience because the one-dollar-a-day poverty line adopted by the United Nations borrows substantially from the Indian poverty line.

Drawing the line

The idea of defining poverty in terms of a poverty line was first proposed during the Indian Labour Conference in 1957. A Working Group under the Planning Commission then stipulated a calorie-based poverty line of Rs 20 per person per month. In 1979, a Task Force was assigned by the Planning Commission to reconsider this definition of poverty. After much deliberation, it too fixed a poverty line largely based on calories. It delineated Rs 49 and Rs 57 per person per month as rural and urban poverty lines respectively at 1973 prices. This poverty line continues to be used to this day except for adjustments based on inflation. In 1999-2000, the poverty lines after adjusting for inflation were Rs 327 and Rs 454 in rural and urban areas respectively. As of December 2005, these figures stand at approximately Rs 368 and Rs 559 per person per month for rural and urban areas.

This official poverty line in India is, however, woefully unsatisfactory. Apart from factoring in about 650 grams of foodgrains every day, the line makes little provision for the other essentials of life such as health, shelter and clothing. The average Indian does not have access to these basic needs. Such

conditions point to the absurdity of India's aspiration of joining the league of developed nations by 2020.

It is striking to note that despite what is obviously a low threshold of poverty, in 1973 nearly 55% of the population or 321 million people were below the poverty line (see Table 1). In 1993, even after 20 years of the State trying to alleviate poverty, the number of poor remained at almost the same level, at 320 million. By 2004, the number declined to about 250 million.

However, this is hardly an achievement, as the rate of decline of poverty since 1973 has been at a dismal 0.81% per annum. Considering that the economy grew at over 5% over the same period, such a low rate of decline of poverty is unacceptable. It is not surprising that the Planning Commission and the government prefer not to talk about these figures and instead dwell on the fact that the percentage of poor has declined to 26%. Many experts dispute even this claim. They suggest that this "decline" is the result of statistical jugglery and not actual fact.

Table 1: Percentage and number of poor in India since 1973 *

Year	Percentage of poor	Number of poor (millions)	Annual real rate of decline in the number of poor ^
1973-74	54.9 %	321	-
1977-78	51.3 %	329	- 0.59 %
1983	44.5 %	323	0.31 %
1987-88	38.9 %	307	1.25 %
1993-94	36.0 %	320	- 0.70 %
1999-00	26.1 %	260	3.40 %

* As per the Expert Group Methodology

^ A negative rate of decline means the number of poor increased

Source: National Institute of Rural Development (2004); Rural Development Statistics, 2002-03.

Broadening the vision

If Vision 2020 of a developed India is to become a reality, a proper definition of poverty is vital. By that time, the State needs to ensure that every citizen not only gets at least two adequate and wholesome meals a day, but also has access to all the basic amenities required to lead a modestly comfortable life with dignity. The present inadequate definition of poverty has ensured that all the policies aimed at alleviating poverty aim

much too low by focussing on eliminating hunger rather than eliminating poverty as a whole.

A good example of this is the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS), which guarantees one able-bodied member of each family work at a wage of Rs 60 a day. Even if this person works on all 30 days of a month, he/she earns only Rs 1,800. For a family of five, that amounts to Rs 360 per person, which is exactly what the rural poverty line is right now. Therefore, even a scheme released with as much fanfare as the NREGS at best only ensures that each person in the family consumes a certain quantity of foodgrains. It guarantees little else. Moreover, the guarantee is only for 100 days in a year, leaving the poor to fend for themselves for the rest of the 265 days.

The present ceiling on poverty is so low that even if the government were to hand out enough money to each poor family to buy enough food to be just above the official poverty line, it would only cost around Rs 570 billion per year. This amount is only 25% of what it costs to maintain the entire bureaucracy of India (around Rs 2,270 billion every year).

The sad fact remains that despite a conveniently low notion of poverty adopted by the government, one in every four Indians is poor. This is abysmal, but the truth is that the situation is much worse. When we develop a poverty line based on all basic needs, we find that over two-thirds of the Indian population is poverty-stricken.

Three problems with the poverty line

As we have argued, the definition of poverty based just on the caloric norm is unacceptable. Many persons who are above the poverty line may in fact be getting less than the stipulated daily calories. In addition, despite the increase in agricultural production, the per capita availability of cereals is about the same since 1981, whereas the per capita availability of pulses has declined from 37.5 grams in 1981 to 28.2 grams in 2003.

Therefore, the present official poverty line, which was only supposed to ensure a certain calorie intake, fails even on that single front. The line is based on the norm that the average person in urban and rural India should be able to consume between 2,100 to 2,400 calories. In 1979, when the poverty line was formed, this was indeed the case. However, currently



(1999-2000), people who are just above the official poverty line do not meet this norm. This group consumes an average of 1,868 calories in rural areas and 1,912 calories in urban areas. Therefore, these groups fall short of the caloric norm by 22% in rural areas and 9% in urban areas.

Secondly, the current caloric standard is not only an inadequate norm, it is also an insufficient nutritional norm. Firstly, the caloric standard set by the Planning Commission is a glaring under-stipulation. The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) prescribes 3,800 calories for an adult male doing heavy activity and 2,925 calories for an adult female carrying out heavy activity. This makes it clear that for the millions of poor unskilled wage labourers in India who do heavy manual labour every day, a stipulation of 2,100-2,400 calories in urban and rural areas is grossly insufficient.

More significantly, it is important to go beyond a simple caloric standard, because the body also needs proteins, fat, minerals, iron and vitamins. Nutrition deficiency is a leading cause of disease. According to the UNICEF, "Malnutrition limits development and the capacity to learn. It also costs lives: about 50% of all childhood deaths are attributed to malnutrition." A nutritious diet is a fundamental need of the human body and this must not be ignored when formulating a poverty line.

Thirdly, as argued above, the poverty line not only ignores important nutritional needs but also the other basic needs of life: shelter, clothing, healthcare, sanitation, drinking water and equal opportunity education.

In 1979, when the present poverty line was defined, the expenditure on non-food items of the group of people who consumed over 2,100-2,400 calories in urban and rural areas was calculated. In addition to the total expenditure on calories, this non-food expenditure was also included in the poverty line. However, such a method is akin to suggesting that whatever the poor spend on non-food items is "enough".

Instead, one needs to analyse what is consumed through non-food expenditure and verify whether it meets the basic needs of a human being. Therefore the amount of non-food expenditure for a poor person should be based on norms, not on behaviour. For example, the latest national sample survey on consumer expenditure shows that those who are just above the poverty line in rural India spend only around Rs 8 per month on medical care. This is grossly insufficient.

Redefining poverty in India

The argument that India's poverty line needs to be substantially redefined is not a new one. Even the Planning Commission recognises this urgent need. Despite this "recognition" no new norms exist. Most of these norms can be derived scientifically, so the only plausible explanation for why the poverty line has not been redefined can be that raising the poverty bar higher will compound the task of India's policymakers and economic planners. It therefore remains at a ridiculously low level to enable claims of achievement and to avoid deployment of resources to areas and people who deserve them the most.

The Centre for Policy Alternatives has attempted to outline a new poverty line. It used the Cost of Basic Needs (CBN) approach to set norms for all basic needs and then attribute a cost to achieving that norm. We derived a new poverty line by adding up these costs. This is a more inclusive definition than the calorie-based poverty line.

We calculated that the total expenditure to live a life with the minimum basic needs of nutrition, healthcare, clothing, shelter etc comes to about Rs 840 per month per person in India. This is almost twice the current urban poverty line for the country. Table 2 shows the details of this cost calculation.

As much as 68.5% of India's population is below this more inclusive poverty line. That is over two-and-a-half times the present official poverty rate of 26.1%. The situation in rural India is worse, with over 84% of the people below this more realistic poverty line.

Table 2: Cost of basic needs

Basic need	Cost per capita per month (Rs.)
Nutritious diet	573
Healthcare	30
Electricity consumption	35
Kerosene consumption	20
Clothing	17
Miscellaneous expenditure	164
Total*	840

* The total is Rs 839. We round it off to Rs 840 for convenience.

Source: Calculated using various sources. For details, refer to 'Redefining Poverty: A New Poverty Line for a New India' at www.cpasind.com.

Table 3: Poverty ratio using a holistic poverty line

Area	Percentage
Rural	84.6
Urban	42.4
Weighted average	68.8

Calculated using Gol (2001a): NSS Report No. 454: Household Consumer Expenditure in India, 1999-2000-- Key Results, NSSO, New Delhi; Gol (2005b): "Statistics, Index Numbers", Labour Bureau, October 2005; and a poverty line of Rs 840.

Although the poverty line of Rs 840 per month is more inclusive of the basic needs of human life, it still only partially reveals the true state of poverty in India. There are some basic needs that cannot be quantified in monetary terms. Therefore, in addition to the poverty line, a proper definition of who is poor should also include "access parameters". Some of the crucial parameters that must be included in the definition of poverty are:

- 37.7% of Indian households do not have access to a nearby water source
- 49% do not have proper shelter
- 69.5% do not have access to suitable toilets

- 85.2% of Indian villages do not have a secondary school
- 43% of Indian villages are not connected to an all-weather road

Therefore, as we define it, a person is poor in India if he or she has a monthly per capita expenditure that is less than Rs 840 or does not have access to drinking water, proper shelter, sanitation, quality secondary education or an all-weather road with public transport.

Raising the bar

The present definition of poverty grossly misrepresents the real situation. It is inappropriate to use a simple caloric measure as the yardstick. The responsibility of the state exceeds this manifold. India needs to upgrade the concept of food security to that of nutritious food security. In addition, it should also be the right of every Indian citizen to have access to safe shelter, sanitation, healthcare, education and clothing. When planning policy for the poor, these benchmarks should be the target.

This poverty line should be separately calculated for each state to account for regional differences in taste, clothing requirement, housing requirement, and others. It is also important to understand that the norms of basic needs and what may be regarded as luxuries, evolve over time. If one tap in a bathroom is considered a minimum norm now, in a few years, as more and more households fulfil this norm, the norm may be upgraded to include a flush toilet; or, by 2020, piped gas for cooking may become the norm. To account for such changes in established norms, the poverty line should be updated every five years. The present poverty line is updated only to account for an increase in prices. In the long run this distorts the picture of poverty.

India needs to urgently revisit its concept of poverty. The present unrealistically low poverty line only serves the purpose of making the government and its development efforts or the lack of it look good. If the State is as committed to addressing the ills of poverty as it claims to be, it should start by redefining the poverty line. This will ensure that the government gets its priorities straight and is able to target policy effectively.

Based on our proposed poverty line of Rs 840 per month, the State should try to ensure that a typical household of five people is able to earn around Rs 50,000 per year, or about Rs 4,200 per month. This family should have access to a sturdy house with basic amenities such as a toilet connected to a sewerage system and electrical fittings. Access to water should be within 10-15 metres if not, ideally, within the home. The children of the family should be able to access their constitutional right to education. Moreover, the State needs to go beyond offering an accessible school and ensure that the schooling guarantees each student equal opportunities in life.

Such a household, where the most fundamental of needs are met, should be the minimum ideal that the State must aim for. This calls for a paradigm shift in the sphere of development policy in India. The shift is overdue and imperative.

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This essay is an abridged version of a paper prepared by the Centre for Policy Alternatives.

Endnotes

Sen, Pronab (2005): "Of Calories and Things: Reflections on Nutritional Norms, Poverty Lines and Consumption Behaviour in India", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Volume XL No 43, October 22-28, 2005.

Government of India (Gol, 1979): Report of The Task Force on Projections of Minimum Needs and Effective Consumption Demand, pp 8, Perspective Planning Division, Planning Commission, New Delhi.

The present poverty line is largely based on the work of this Task Force. For details of the present poverty line, refer to Government of India (1993): Report of the Expert Group on Estimation of Proportion and Number of Poor, Perspective Planning Division, Planning Commission, New Delhi. Available at www.planningcommission.nic.in.

Saxena, Dr N C (2001): 'Poverty Estimates for 1999-2000', Planning Commission, New Delhi.

These figures are arrived at by indexing the rural poverty line with the Consumer Price Index for Agricultural Labourers and the urban poverty line with the Consumer Price Index for Industrial Workers. Both are available from the Labour Bureau, Government of India. These are the indices recommended by the Planning Commission (Gol, 1993). However further changes such as adjusting the data to state-wise price indices etc have not been carried out.

This is calculated from caloric norm and the nutrition chart given in Government of India (2001c): NSS Report No. 471: Nutritional Intake in India, 1999-2000, National Sample Survey Organisation, New Delhi.

Calculated using the compound growth formula. Rate of decline in Table 1 also calculated using the same formula.

India Vision 2020 is an official document prepared by the Planning Commission (Gol, 2002). It is meant to be "an articulation of the desired end results in [broad] terms" of development activity by 2020.

This figure is also referred to as the "poverty gap". It denotes the total amount of money required to bring everybody just above the poverty line, assuming that the money is handed out without any distribution costs. The amount is approximated with the assumption that the population is normally distributed across expenditure classes.

This bureaucracy accounts for only about 1 percent of the total population of India according to Government of India (2001): Government of India's Pensionary Liability, Ministry of Finance, New Delhi.

Government of India (2005c): National Accounts Statistics 2005, pp 62, Central Statistical Organisation, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation.

Tata Services Limited (2005): Statistical Outline of India 2004-05, pp. 45, Department of Economics and Statistics, Mumbai.

Calculated from Government of India (2001c): NSS Report No. 471: Nutritional Intake in India, 1999-2000, National Sample Survey Organisation, New Delhi.

Indian Council of Medical Research (2004): Nutrient Requirements and Recommended Dietary Allowances for Indians, National Institute of Nutrition, Hyderabad.

The Planning Commission reached these figures after looking at the caloric need of the whole population based on their age, sex and occupations. This ensures a conveniently low caloric standard because it includes the well-off members of society who do not physically exert themselves and therefore don't need as many calories as someone who is doing manual labour. Instead, while stipulating a caloric standard for the poor in India, it should be taken for granted that adults are carrying out manual labour and thus doing heavy activity. Taking this into consideration and the age and gender of the population, the prescribed caloric standard should be 2700 calories per day. This is 300 (600) calories more than the Commission's recommendation for those in rural (urban) areas.

Indian Council of Medical Research (2004): Nutrient Requirements and Recommended Dietary Allowances for Indians, National Institute of Nutrition, Hyderabad.

Government of India (1993): Report of the Expert Group on Estimation of Proportion and Number of Poor, Perspective Planning Division, Planning Commission, New Delhi.

However, one of the most frequent arguments against updating the poverty line except with the inflation index is the fact that over-time comparisons become untenable. This argument is unjustified. You can always compute a "food expenditure level" which can be increased every year based on inflation. There is no need to subordinate the task of poverty measurement to that of inter-temporal poverty comparison.

However, one of the most frequent arguments against updating the poverty line except with the inflation index is the fact that over-time comparisons become untenable. This argument is unjustified. You can always compute a "food expenditure level" which can be increased every year based on inflation. There is no need to subordinate the task of poverty measurement to that of inter-temporal poverty comparison.

Nutrition: The need and the cost

An Indian Council for Medical Research (ICMR) book on dietary guidelines for Indians specifies: "Man needs a wide range of nutrients to lead a healthy and active life and these are derived through the diet he consumes daily. The components of his diets must be chosen judiciously to provide all the nutrients he needs in adequate amounts and in proper proportions.... The body needs energy [calories are the primary source of this] for maintaining body temperature, metabolic activity, supporting growth and physical work.... Proteins provide amino acids for the synthesis of body.... In the adult, dietary protein is essential to synthesise new proteins.... Fat is a concentrated source of energy ... and also helps in the absorption of beta-carotene and other fat-soluble vitamins.... While a minimum amount of fat has to be present in the diet, excess of fat in the diet is considered harmful.... Minerals that are important in human nutrition are calcium, phosphorous and magnesium and the electrolytes, sodium and potassium.... [Iron is important because] iron deficiency anaemia is widespread in our country, the prevalence varying from 45% in male adults to 70% or more in women or children.... Vitamins are accessory food factors, which carry out diverse functions in the body."

Nutrition deficiency is also a leading cause for disease. According to the UNICEF, "malnutrition limits development and the capacity to learn. It also costs lives: about 50% of all childhood deaths are attributed to malnutrition". Lack of vitamin C leads to scurvy, a disorder that affects our bones. Vitamin B1 deficiency leads to mental confusion, muscle weakness and heart disorder. Osteoporosis, or the tendency to lose bone mass, is linked with lack of calcium in our diet. A zinc deficit in children leads to growth retardation. Therefore, it is amply clear that a nutritious diet is a fundamental need of the human body; this must not be ignored when formulating a poverty line.

Out of all the nutritional requirements mentioned above, the present poverty line only fulfils the minimum protein requirement of 50 gm per day. This is mainly because 75% of total protein is derived from cereals. However, to ensure adequate consumption of all the essential nutrients, a commodity-basket should be formulated that includes a minimum diet of cereals, pulses, oils, vegetables, fruits, etc. Thereafter, the cost of this diet should be calculated and included when constructing the poverty line. This will ensure that if someone is above this renewed poverty line, he or she will have the capability to consume a nutritious diet.

Even in this day and age, around one in four Indians are malnourished. The consequences of such a plight are devastating as nutrition is the most important need of a human being after water. Presently 47% of Indian children below the age of 5 are underweight for their age. Unicef reports that one in every three malnourished children in the world is in India.

However, it is not as if the government is not in the know about the importance of balanced nutrition because the National Institute of Nutrition (NIN) under the aegis of the ICMR itself recommends what it considers is a nutritious diet for healthy living. The NIN has also published a balanced diet for Indians, reproduced in the table above. In fact, the apathy of the government is quite evident from the fact that despite having sponsored detailed studies on nutrition in India, it still adopts a norm that only sees poverty in terms of calories.

Mustard oil is used for calculations on visible fats/oils Source: Calculated using Table 3 and 4

The last row in Table 3 provides the ideal monthly expenditure on food that enables one to have a complete nutritious diet. Using the age-sex distribution information of the population, one can calculate that the per capita expenditure on food that provides for the recommended balanced diet for the average Indian person should be around Rs 573 per month. Therefore, for a typical family of five, the total monthly expenditure on just food should be about Rs 2,900. If the two adult members of a family work for 25 days a month on the officially prescribed minimum wage of Rs 60 each, they would just about earn Rs 3,000 between them.

Therefore in order to have a nutritious diet, nearly all the money that can possibly be earned needs to be spent on food. It must be remembered that daily wage labourers account for over 80% of our workforce of over 422 million. The average number of working days available to agricultural labour has also decreased drastically over the last two decades: from 123

Consumed by calories

A realistic measure of poverty would recognise that mere intake of calories does not indicate nutritional status. It would move away from an emphasis on minimal energy requirements and consumption expenditures and recognise that the balance of nutrients in a diet, absorptive capacity of the body, quality of living environment, nature of a person's work, and gender, among other factors, determine the body's food and energy requirements. A poverty line that ignores such complexities is missing a large part of the picture of deprivation

ALPANA SAGAR

It should be a matter of great concern, for economic as well as ethical reasons, that a large proportion of the population remains poor in India. Despite the Five Year Plans, policies for development and poverty alleviation programs, millions of people continue to live in poverty. The per capita expenditure in rural areas is still only Rs 10 a day for 30.2% of Indians, Rs 20 a day for 41%, Rs 30 a day for about 15% percent, and only 5% spend more than this amount.

Poverty can be relative or absolute. The absolute viewpoint defines poverty as the inability of an individual's income to meet subsistence needs. Relative poverty is defined as a situation in which the individual's income is low relative to some social standard. The poverty line in India attempts to measure levels of absolute poverty. People below the poverty line are defined as those with a per capita daily energy intake of less than 2,400 kilocalories in rural areas and 2,100 kilocalories in urban areas.

Does use of this prescribed energy intake as a marker reflect the real impoverishment in our country? Can we get an accurate picture of poverty and of poor people's lives by talking only in terms of energy intake? Does talking about 'poverty lines' sideline the fact that absolute poverty threatens the very survival of families?

Delving into data

The National Sample Survey Organisation's (NSSO) data on consumption expenditure and food intake is used to calculate the poverty line. First, the per capita daily total expenditure is grouped. The food items utilised in each group are noted and the caloric value of this food is calculated. An already specified standard daily calorie intake is taken. The total daily expenditure per person and daily caloric intake are correlated. People whose expenditure is not sufficient for them to obtain the standard daily intake of calories are said to be below the poverty line. The poverty line is updated by accounting for changes in price levels over time.

Examining consumption expenditure is useful because individuals may generate income, but consumption would be shared among members of the household. However, it is implicitly assumed that this distribution would be equal which may not be the case. Consumption may also not be met out of current income, but can come from assets, debt and savings. As

a result, expenditure may not always indicate the real economic status of the family.

The methodology of the NSSO's latest survey (1999-2000) for obtaining data on expenditure has been strongly critiqued. The critiques indicate that the survey under-represents poverty levels. Despite the debates about the methodology, the current estimate of people living below the poverty line is high at 27-33%.

The methodology used to collect data to calculate the poverty line is important, but the prescribed caloric value that determines the official level of the poverty line plays an equally



important role. What is the basis of this value? Does it give us a true picture of chronic hunger? Does this poverty line help in remedying the situation?

Energy intake: Inaccurate lines

In 1971, Dandekar and Rath described the first assessment of poverty. They used National Sample Survey data for 1960-61 and 1961-62. There was a basic difference between the methodology they used and later calculations for determining the number of poor people. Dandekar and Rath began by estimating expenditure a little below average and then calculating the per capita kcalories available at this level. They found that the per capita daily intake of calories was 2,194 in rural areas and 2,159 in urban areas.

This was close to the value of 2,250 kcals suggested by nutritional experts, so they took the persons below this about one-third of the rural and almost half the urban population as living on diets inadequate even in terms of calories. However, they pointed out that when they used the expenditure standard for the minimum level of living as calculated by a distinguished group set up by the government, about 40% of the rural and 50% of the urban population was below the desirable minimum.

The concept of a poverty line was introduced later, on the recommendation of the Task Force on 'Minimum Needs and Effective Consumption Demands'. Using the recommendations of the Nutrition Expert Group, 1968, the daily per capita calorie requirement was derived separately for rural and urban areas as 2,435 kcals and 2,095 kcals respectively. This is close to the present level of 2,400/2,100 kcals that is used to estimate the population below the poverty line.

The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) Expert Group (1990) has concluded that the poverty line should be at a weighted average standard for the whole population at 2,200 kcals per capita per day. This, according to ICMR documents on nutrient requirements, is said to represent the actual requirements of individuals of the two sexes in a population averaged over their entire range of activity and body weights. That is, the weighted average (ICMR 1990). It is not clear whether studies were carried out to reach this figure or whether it is a theoretical calculation.

Although 2,200 kcals is the latest suggested intake for calculating the poverty line, the document notes an alternative physiological approach. This approach uses the lowest level of energy intake possible for "habitually active adults". Two studies in apparently healthy and active adult males engaged in sedentary and moderate activity have been used to fix this caloric level. The weight of a sedentary adult male is taken to be on average 54 kilos. He thus needs only 2,221 kcals/day at the requirement of 41.5 kcals per kilo. A moderate working male is said to need 2,180 kcals/day at the requirement of 47.3 kcals/kilo (ICMR 1990). This indicates a body weight of only 46.1 kg for the latter. It is noteworthy that this body weight of 46.1 kg for a person doing moderate levels of work is 25% less than the ideal weight of 60 kilos.

These "actual required" caloric values are interesting because the "recommended allowances" for a sedentary person or a person doing moderate work, but of ideal weight are very different (Table I). The Recommended Dietary Allowances (RDAs), if used wisely, would allow people to attain their potential.

	Sedentary work	Moderate work	Heavy work
Male: 60 kg	2425	2875	3800
Female: 55 kg	1875	2225	2925

Source: ICMR Nutrient Requirements and Recommended Dietary Allowances for Indians

It is significant that when we talk of ideal "recommended" calculations (RDAs), we consider the well-nourished Indian male/female, but when calculating "necessary" energy requirement we take the malnourished worker to see what minimum energy keeps him running! It does not seem to matter that he has just enough energy intake to function, and is just above starvation. The RDAs talk of requirements of different levels of energy for different levels of work (Table I) but the latest ICMR proposal of 2,200 kcals does not consider this. Using the logic of "actual required" 2,200 kcals, we find that a male doing heavy work -- thus utilising 63.3 kcals per kg -- should weigh only 34.8 kilos!

If we calculate 54 kilos for a sedentary worker but only 46.1 kilos for a moderate worker we have accepted the "small but healthy" hypothesis. "Small but healthy" was a theory put forward in 1982. It said that individuals can "adapt" over time to inadequate intakes by not only becoming more efficient metabolisers and reducing losses and requirements, but also by becoming "smaller" over time and further reducing requirements. According to this theory, this is at no "functional cost". The experts at the ICMR have obviously accepted this theory.

The complexity of the issue of adaptation as discussed later by Rand and Gopalan has been completely bypassed. Gopalan pointed out that adaptation represents a state of strategic metabolic and functional retreat in response to stress, which may help the victim to ward off death, but will unfortunately not help him to "live" life. Rand has pointed out that not only did data indicate that capacity to work could be affected among "adapted" individuals, the reduced intake also meant they had no margin of safety above minimal needs to meet environmental insults like illness. He also pointed out that low intakes could decrease longevity. Such individuals could stave off death for some time but they would have higher levels of morbidity and shorter life spans than the average.

When the present lower energy requirements are taken in tandem with the Tenth Plan's views that energy requirements of Indians are likely to be substantially lower than current ICMR recommendations it seems likely that under-nutrition may be accepted as the norm. We must not consider a state of chronic energy deficiency as "normal" merely because it is so common.

In such a situation the number of people below the poverty line would decrease and the nation's food problems would be solved.

Adequate calories, inadequate nutrition

If calorie intake is used to decide the poverty line, is it a sufficient indicator of the adequacy of a diet? Energy intake may well be a poor measurement of nutritional status. When calorie levels are used to set the poverty line, it implicitly assumes that a diet with sufficient calories will contain adequate quantities of all nutrients. Such a diet should ideally have sufficient proteins and other micronutrients to meet a person's nutritional needs. But dietary patterns have changed over the decades and a diet with adequate calories may not automatically be a balanced diet. Measuring only calories may not tell us if the person has a "nutritious" diet.

The inadequacy of measuring only energy requirement is illustrated in a well-known early-19th century experiment done by Magendie. He took a single food that was accepted as being nutritious and fed it to dogs. Sugar (very high in energy content) was the first food that he tested. The dog ate well for the first two weeks but then began to lose weight, developed a corneal ulcer and died after a month. Magendie repeated the experiment using various other substitutes as sole foods in each case and every time the animals eventually died. Similarly studies on scurvy, beri beri and pellagra revealed that while foods could contain enough energy and maybe protein, they could still be deficient in other compounds. This reveals the importance of a nutritionally balanced diet.

To be adequate, a diet must not just have sufficient calories but an adequate amount of other nutrients such as proteins, vitamins and iron. An analysis done by Qadeer and Priyadarshi reveals that for the poor the energy intake as well as protein, iron and vitamins are all inadequate, and the energy intakes of the middle class are adequate but micronutrient deficiencies remain concentrated in this group.

Studies of people with mal-absorption reveal that intakes may be adequate, but if the absorptive capacity of the gut is affected, the actual amount of nutrient reaching the system is inadequate and the person will lose weight over time. Similarly, while intake may be sufficient, poor quality of water and sanitation can lead to recurrent gastrointestinal disorders that could affect absorption. A crowded physical environment can increase susceptibility to communicable diseases and fevers, which could affect the body's energy requirements. Intakes that may be adequate in ideal conditions may therefore be inadequate in a poor environment. Those who live in such conditions are usually the poor, who also have inadequate intakes.

This means that diets must be balanced and the person's health, environment, activity, climate and method of cooking must also be considered when looking at "energy intake". But our policymakers unhesitatingly accept calorie standards and consider health for the poor only as their capacity to produce a sufficient amount of work regardless of the quality of their lives.

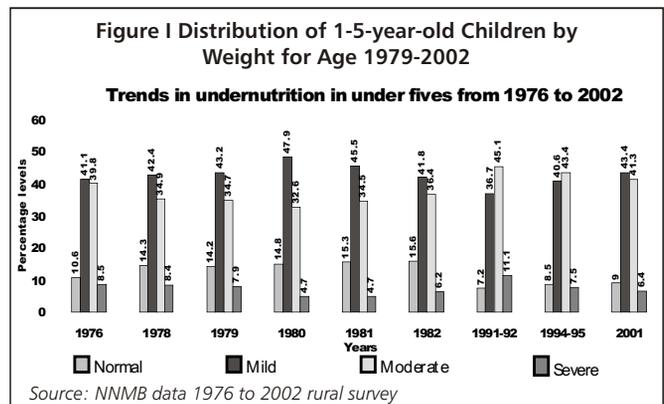
The poor are considered merely as transducers for converting energy to manual work

Many strands of poverty

What does it mean when we say that about 30% of the population (NSSO: about 27%; UNDP: about 33%) lives below the poverty line? It means that about 70% of India's citizens are food insecure to various degrees, but those below the poverty line are always food insecure. The lowest 20% get just about 1,500 calories of energy per capita per day, much lower than the average recommendation of 2,400 kcal that is, even by this conservative standard, they lack about 900 kcals per day. In other words, they are subsisting at starvation levels. Starvation deaths of adivasi children in Maharashtra and other states are the outcome of the children being unable to "adapt" to low levels of caloric intake.

Caloric requirements are met mainly by cereals, and cereal food security in India is important. India increased its food production from 50.8 million tonnes in 1950-51 to 213.5 million tonnes in 2003-04, but production has declined to 204.6 million tonnes in 2004-05. The per capita availability of foodgrain increased from 395 grams per day in 1951 to 510 grams per day in 2000 and then decreased to 417 grams per day in 2001. This year we have had to import items of food. The problem is related not only to supply but also to purchasing power and distribution. The targeted Public Distribution System (PDS) has been criticised by many. Any attempt to increase food intake would have to act at multiple levels.

Aggregate statistics that mask the grim reality are often used to obfuscate the issue. From 1976 till the 1980s, nutrition as assessed by anthropometry for children, improved to some extent. However from the 1980s to the '90s, there has been a fall in nutrition with only a marginal improvement over time (Figure 1). The 2002 National Nutrition Monitoring Bureau (NNMB) data indicates a marginal shift from moderate to mild malnutrition but the picture is still abysmal. Even today about 37% of males and 39% of females have chronic energy deficiency (NNMB 2002) more than the number below the poverty line.



An examination by income shows that the prevalence of severe malnutrition is more than twice in the poorest households as compared to the economically better-off households (NNMB

2002). That is, the poorest children are carrying the burden of under-nutrition. The links of poor nutrition to a poor quality of life are well-known. The children are more susceptible to diseases partly due to the association between nutrition and immunity, but also because the more undernourished children also come from more deprived families. This link between poverty, malnutrition, a degraded environment, infection and mortality (Table II) is extremely significant.

Table II: Infant and under-5 mortality rate

Social groups	Rural				Urban			
	Infant mortality rate		Under-5 mortality rate		Infant mortality rate		Under-5 mortality rate	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Scheduled caste	89	90	112	134	71	58	87	86
Scheduled tribe	89	86	125	121	48	67	61	89
Others	70	75	88	103	41	43	52	58
Total	76	79	97	111	45	46	57	63

Source: Government of India 2005

Poverty is not just a calorie line but is related to chronic food insecurity, hunger, under-nutrition, a high burden of ill health, high mortality and enormous suffering (Banerji D [1982] Poverty Class and Health Culture, Volume I, Lok Paksh, New Delhi India). The poverty line should measure this complex reality. A poverty line that measures only calorie intake is missing a large part of the picture of deprivation. Caloric intake must be studied according to gender, age and occupation. Besides studies that examine the interconnections between nutrition, energy intake and expenditure, we also need studies that show what it means to be poor.

Policies for nutrition intake must add to the present requirements of calories, the amount of food necessary for the poor to have the best possible diets (and not only energy) if they are to attain their potential over time. It's time we stopped dismissing poverty as a line and stopped viewing the poor as mere statistics.

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The Infant Mortality Rate is the 'ratio of infant deaths registered in a given year to the total number of live births registered in the same year'. It is expressed per 1000 live births.

'All we want is to live'

Deaths related to malnutrition have been in the news in Melghat, Amravati district, Maharashtra, since the 1990s. Despite an interim order of the Bombay High Court and several welfare schemes, 670 infants died of malnutrition in Melghat between April 2005 and March 2006. What is going wrong?

ANOSH MALEKAR

Everyone in Saddu Bethekar's house appears to be sick and frail after years of sleeping on an empty stomach. There is Shanti, who hardly looks her four years and is irritable instead of playful, her older sisters, Sugana, 8, and Sugarati, 12, and their mother, Bughai, 40, who tiredly goes about doing her chores inside their straw and mud house. Saddu himself is complaining of recurring abdominal pain and appears to be defeated by his family's endless health problems. "We are helpless," the 44-year-old Korku adivasi says.

Across the villages and hamlets in Melghat, 750 kilometres northeast of Mumbai in Maharashtra's Amravati district, many in the Korku community are similarly afflicted. We could call their condition 'malnutrition', a term popularised by NGOs who swear by the World Health Organisation's guidelines.

It is tough to survive the monsoon in Melghat. The grain stocks of the previous agricultural season are exhausted and the current season demands hard labour in the fields. The Korku families eat whatever little is available. "We are living on jowar roti. Sometimes we have dal. Rice is out of the question," Saddu says. The Korkus occasionally eat kutki, a local variety of rice. There is little else.

Deaths related to severe hunger in Melghat have been in the news since the 1990s. Between 1992 and 1997, an estimated 5,000 children died in the 2,600-square-kilometre area of forest. Despite an interim order of the Bombay High Court and several welfare schemes, 670 infants died of malnutrition in Melghat between April 2005 and March 2006. The number was 468 for the previous year in the same period.

The fact that most of the villages in the forests of Melghat are difficult to reach, is one of the reasons trotted out for this continuing state of affairs. The state and central governments and NGOs too claim to have poured money into Melghat to ensure supplies and medical aid, but the Korkus continue to be hungry.

Other reasons are also cited the poor quality of the food that is available, a lack of safe drinking water and sanitation, the low social status of women and early marriages, the tendency to not breastfeed infants for at least six months or give them adequate complementary foods thereafter.

In reality, unrelieved poverty that the state's policies have done nothing to mitigate, a non-existent healthcare system and a lack of civic and education facilities, remain some of the main reasons for the misery in Melghat.

Some years ago, the Maharashtra government appointed a committee of doctors. It declared that sickle cell anaemia was rampant among the Korkus. The implied excuse was: if the Korkus were born with a genetic "defect", what could the government do? However, this anaemic condition could itself be the slow outcome of generations of malnutrition. Can India ignore 500,000 adivasi citizens (about 240,000 in Maharashtra and the others across the border in Madhya Pradesh) by saying they are genetically predisposed to certain health problems?

Over the years, government officials have tried in other ingenious ways to refute charges of death due to malnutrition. Typically, they cite poverty, "ignorance" and the "obstinacy" of the Korkus. Government doctors, anganwadi workers and forest officials say the Korkus will never change, that they lack



"nutritional sense", they refuse to milk their cows, sell off nutritious farm products for cash and use mahua, which has high nutritional value, to extract liquor. The list of what the Korkus do wrong, is long. Even some of the many NGOs in Melghat echo this line of reasoning.

The people have a different story to tell. They say that cash crops like soybean and cotton have taken over from local crops like kodo, kutki and savarya, which once formed the basis of their year-long food security. "Agriculture is a waste. We take loans to buy seeds and fertilisers but hardly anything grows. Whatever grows has to be sold to pay back the moneylender, whether we have enough to eat or not," says Sukhdeo Kasdekar from Rahu village.

The Integrated Tribal Development Project (ITDP) was meant to ensure a fair price for the adivasis' produce. But a complex procurement procedure compels these marginal farmers to sell their produce to local landlords. When they are really on the edge, the Korkus barter their soybean for food or even sell the standing crop at throwaway prices.

A big blow came in 1974 when a 726 square kilometre area, which included 47 villages, was declared part of Project Tiger. In her book *Our Children Are Gone*, human rights activist Sheela Barse has explained how the forest laws worked against the Korkus. The Forest Working Plan for Melghat (1993-2003) required all creepers and so-called "inferior species" in the forest to be destroyed. This instruction, the book says, was given despite the fact that officials in Melghat knew that a number of the creepers were of "ethno-medical importance" and were used by the Korkus to treat a variety of ailments.

The denial of access to products like mahua, tendu leaf and edible gum proved a matter of life and death for the adivasis, observes Vinita Tatke of Maitri, a Pune-based NGO. "Today, they cannot collect forest produce in large quantities to sell. They cannot hunt or fish without bribing the forest officials."

Still, the argument goes: the Korkus eat unhealthy food, they have too many children, they spend money on drinking and



trust traditional healers more than doctors. The fact is, there are not enough doctors, government or private, in Melghat that the Korkus can approach.

"If there is a health problem the bhumka, a local healer, steps in to administer 'damma', a painful procedure which involves branding the patient with hot iron," says activist Madhukar Mane. If there is a major health crisis, the Korkus trek through the forests before boarding a bus to the nearest town. "All we want is to live," Saddu says.

Melghat remains what it was when India became independent. A few dust roads winding through dry streambeds, which flood in peak monsoon, cutting off all communication with the rest of the country.

Beyond these dust roads, you will find Saddu's home. Here, Shanti has "grade four malnutrition", according to Dr Sharad Ransing, who is volunteering in Melghat as part of a campaign against child death organised by Maitri. "Her family members are also suffering from common ailments. Their immunity is taking a beating and they all stand at risk of getting life-threatening diseases."

A confirmed case of severe malnutrition and others at high risk of degenerating further into a state of emaciation, in a single family of the Bodhu hamlet in Melghat. Not too far from a bustling and powerful Mumbai, where perhaps not many could care about what is happening in these hungry forests.

Growing hunger

The rich forests of Melghat are home to an impoverished people

Melghat hit the headlines in 1997 for the death of 500 adivasi children due to malnutrition. Children have been dying every year, especially during the rains when the adivasis do not have adequate employment for daily earnings.

Melghat is a vast forested tract spread over two tehsils of Amravati district, Chikhaldara and Dharni. It covers a geographical area of about 4,426 sq km. Of this, 3,630 sq km is in Chikhaldara. This tehsil retains its dense forest cover because of its comparatively low population about 76,000 people in 197 villages. The 796 sq km of Dharni tehsil have fewer forests due to the pressure of 1.13 lakh people living in 153 villages.

It was earlier estimated that the deaths of adivasi children mostly occurred in Dharni and not in the Melghat Tiger Reserve. The problem has now spread, with deaths in 39 villages of the Multiple Use Area (MUA) of the tiger reserve. The reserve covers 1,676 sq km of forests. It includes the Gugamal National Park (361.28 sq km), which has no village within its boundaries, the Melghat Wildlife Sanctuary (788.75 sq km) with 19 villages and a MUA (526.90 sq km) with the 39 villages.

The reserve has a human population of 25,000. Of these, 8000 people live in 19 villages of the sanctuary and 17,000 adivasis live in the 39 villages of the MUA. Studies have shown that one of the reasons for the rising child deaths among the Korkus of Melghat is that they are denied access to traditional foods like wild flowers, tubers, fruits, crabs and fish from the rich forest.

How famine was created

The British insisted that they had rescued India from "timeless hunger". In fact, there were 31 serious famines in 120 years of British rule against only 17 recorded famines in the previous two millennia. It was the process of incorporating India into the world market to serve colonial interests that caused incalculable damage to Indian peasants, the agrarian economy, and food security

MIKE DAVIS

There is little evidence that rural India had ever experienced subsistence crises on the scale of the Bengal catastrophe of 1770 under East India Company rule or the long siege by disease and hunger between 1875 and 1920 that slowed population growth almost to a standstill...

India under the Mogul Emperors (who had controlled India since the 16th century) was generally free of famine until the 1770s. In pre-British India, before the creation of a railway-girded national market in grain, village-level food reserves were larger, patrimonial welfare more widespread, and grain prices in surplus areas better insulated against speculation.

The Mogul state, moreover, "regarded the protection of the peasant as an essential obligation", and there are numerous examples of humane, if sporadic, relief operations. Like their Chinese contemporaries, the Mogul rulers relied on a quartet of fundamental policies -- embargoes on food exports, anti-speculative price regulation, tax relief, and distribution of free food without a force-labour counterpart -- that were an anathema to British Utilitarians. They also zealously policed the grain trade in the public interest.....

In contrast to the British punitive taxation of irrigation and its neglect of traditional wells and reservoirs the Moguls used tax subsidies to promote water conservation. "...In the Ahmedabad region, for example, it was common to waive the tax on a 'rabi' [spring harvested] crop raised through irrigation from a recently constructed well. The concession continued until the tax exemptions were held to have equalled the cost of construction."

Food security was also probably better in the Deccan during the period of Maratha rule. There were few landless labourers, occupancy rights were not tied to revenue payment, taxes varied according to the actual harvest, common lands and resources were accessible to the poor, and the rulers subsidised local irrigation improvements with cheap state-backed loans.

In contrast to the rigidity and dogmatism of British land-and-revenue settlements, both the Moguls and Marathas flexibly tailored their rule to take account of the crucial ecological relationships and unpredictable climate fluctuations of the subcontinent's drought-prone regions....Although the British insisted that they had rescued India from "timeless hunger", more than one official was jolted when Indian nationalists quoted from an 1878 study published in the prestigious Journal of the Statistical Society that contrasted 31 serious famines in

120 years of British rule against only 17 recorded famines in the entire previous two millennia.

India and China, in other words, did not enter modern history as the helpless "lands of famine" so universally enshrined in the Western imagination. Certainly the intensity of the ENSO [El Niño/Southern Oscillation cycle] in the late-19th century, perhaps equalled only on three or four other occasions in the last millennium, must loom large in any explanation of the catastrophes of the 1870s and 1890s. But it is scarcely the only independent variable. Equal causal weight, or more, must be accorded to the growing social vulnerability to climate variability that became so evident not only in south Asia and north China but also in north-east Brazil and southern Africa in the late-19th century.

As geographer Michael Watts has argued in his history of the "silent violence" of drought-famine in colonial Nigeria: "Climate risk ... is not given by nature but ... by 'negotiated settlement' since each society has institutional, social, and technical means for coping with risk ... Famines [thus] are social crises that represent the failures of particular economic and political systems."

The making of the 'Third World'

Differences in income and wealth between the great civilisations of the 18th century were relatively slight. "It is very likely," claims historian Paul Bairoch "that, in the middle of the 18th century, the average standard of living in Europe was a little bit lower than that of the rest of the world." When the sans culottes (French proletariat) stormed the Bastille in 1789, the largest manufacturing districts in the world were the Yangzi Delta in mid-China and Bengal in India, with Guangdong and Guangxi in southern China and coastal Madras in India not far behind. India alone produced one-quarter of world manufactures, and while its "pre-capitalist agrarian labour productivity was probably less than the Japanese-Chinese level, its commercial capital surpassed that of the Chinese."

The stereotype of the Indian labourer as a half-starved wretch in a loincloth collapses in the face of data about comparative standards of living. "Indeed, there is compelling evidence that South Indian labourers had higher earnings than their British counterparts in the 18th century and lived lives of greater financial security." Because the productivity of land was higher in South India, weavers and other artisans enjoyed better diets than average Europeans. More importantly, their

unemployment rates tended to be lower because they possessed superior rights of contract and exercised more economic power. Even outcaste agricultural labourers in Madras earned more in real terms than English farm labourers. By 1900, in contrast, the average British household income was 21 times higher.

...The usual stereotype of 19th century economic history is that Asia stood still while the Industrial Revolution propelled Britain, followed by the United States and eventually the rest of Western Europe, down the path of high-speed growth in Gross National Product (GNP). The future Third World, dominated by the highly developed commercial and handicraft economies of India and China, surrendered ground grudgingly until 1850 (when it still generated 65% of global GNP), but then declined with increasing rapidity through the rest of the 19th century (only 38% of world GNP in 1900 and 22% in 1960).

But why did Asia stand in place? The rote answer is because it was weighed down with the chains of tradition and Malthusian demography, although this had not prevented Qing China, whose rate of population increase was about the same as Europe's, from experiencing extraordinary economic growth throughout the 18th century.

The relevant question, however, is not so much why the Industrial Revolution occurred first in England, Scotland and Belgium, but why other advanced regions of the 18th century world economy did not adapt their handicraft manufactures to the new conditions of production and competition in the 19th century.

The looms of India and China were defeated not so much by market competition as they were forcibly dismantled by war, invasion, opium and a Lancashire-imposed system of one-way tariffs. From about 1780 or 1800 onward, every serious attempt by a non-Western society to move into a fast lane of development or to regulate its terms of trade was met by a military as well as an economic response from Britain or a competing imperial country.

The use of force to configure a "liberal" world economy is what Pax Britannica was really about. The Victorians resorted to gunboats on at least 75 different occasions. The simultaneous British triumphs in the 1857 Indian Mutiny and the 1858 Second Opium War in China were the epochal victories over Asian economic autonomy that made a world of free trade possible in the second half of the 19th century.

The 'variable' of violent incorporation

What were the variables that led to famine deaths in the 19th century? Research over the last 20 years or so into the social and economic histories of the regions "teleconnected" to ENSO's episodic disturbances has demolished Orientalist stereotypes of immutable poverty and overpopulation as the natural preconditions of the major 19th-century famines. In fact, peasants and farmers became dramatically more pregnable to natural disaster after 1850 as their local economies were violently incorporated into the world market.

Three points of articulation with larger socio-economic

structures were especially decisive for rural subsistence in the late-19th century "proto-Third World".

First, the forcible incorporation of smallholder production into commodity and financial circuits controlled from overseas tended to undermine traditional food security. It was not entrepreneurial opportunity but subsistence adversity (high taxes, chronic indebtedness, inadequate acreage, loss of subsidiary employment opportunities, enclosure of common resources, dissolution of patrimonial obligations and so on) that typically promoted smallholders' turn to cash-crop cultivation. Rich landowners redeployed the fortunes that they built during export booms into usury, rack-renting and crop brokerage. "Marginal subsistence producers," historian Hans Medick points out, "... did not benefit from the market under these circumstances; they were devoured by it." Medick, writing about the analogous predicament of marginal smallholders in "proto-industrial" Europe, provides an exemplary description of the dilemma of millions of Indian and Chinese poor peasants in the late-19th century:

"For them rising agrarian prices did not necessarily mean increasing incomes. Since their marginal productivity was low and production fluctuated, rising agrarian prices tended to be a source of indebtedness rather than affording them the opportunity to accumulate surpluses ... Especially in years of bad harvests, and high prices, the petty producers were compelled to buy additional grain, and, worse, to go into debt. Then, in good harvest years when cereal prices were low, they found it hard to extricate themselves from the previously accumulated debts; owing to the low productivity of their holdings they could not produce sufficient quantities for sale."

Thus, Medick concludes, "instead of profiting from exchange, [peasants] were forced by the market into the progressive deterioration of their conditions of production, ie the loss of their property titles." As a result, the position of small rural



producers in the international economic hierarchy equated with downward mobility or, at best, stagnation. In north China and India, there is consistent evidence of falling household wealth and increased fragmentation or alienation of land. Whether farmers were directly engaged by foreign capital or were simply producing for domestic markets subject to international competition (like the cotton-spinning peasants in western Shandong in north China), commercialisation went hand in hand with pauperisation without any silver lining of technical change or agrarian capitalism.

Second, the integration of millions of tropical cultivators into the world market during the late-19th century was accompanied by a dramatic deterioration in their terms of trade. Peasants' lack of market power vis-à-vis crop merchants and creditors was redoubled by their commodities' falling international purchasing power. As economist W Arthur Lewis suggests, comparable productivity or transport costs alone cannot explain an emergent structure of global unequal exchange that valued the products of tropical agriculture so differently from those of temperate farming:

"With the exception of sugar, all the commodities whose price was lower in 1913 than in 1883 were commodities procured almost wholly in the tropics. All the commodities whose prices rose over this 30-year period were commodities in which the temperate countries produced a substantial part of total supplies. The fall in ocean freight rates affected tropical more than temperate prices, but this should not make a difference of more than five percentage points."

Third, formal and informal British imperialism, backed up by the supranational automatism of the Gold Standard, eroded local fiscal autonomy and impeded state-level developmental responses -- especially investments in water conservancy and irrigation -- that might have reduced vulnerability to climate shocks. As Lord Curzon, India's viceroy from 1898 to 1905, once famously complained to the House of Lords, tariffs "were decided in London, not in India; in England's interests, not in India's." Moreover, any grassroots benefit from British railroad and canal construction was largely cancelled by official neglect of local irrigation and the brutal enclosures of forest and pasture resources. Export earnings failed to return to smallholders not only as increments in household income, but also as usable social capital or state investment.

The myth of 'Malthusia'

But didn't population pressures -- especially in India and China where partible systems of inheritance were the rule -- also play a role in undermining food security in the 19th century?

Economist W Arthur Lewis, one of the leading authorities on the 19th-century world economy, assumed as a matter of course in an influential 1978 study that the underlying cause of famine in 19th century British India was not the "drain of wealth" to England, but "a large population that continued to live at subsistence level on inadequately watered marginal lands, without a profitable cash crop." Similarly, the historiography of late imperial China has been haunted by how a presumed population explosion of the 18th century squeezed

arable land to the threshold of chronic famine.

The relationship between population and subsistence in Asia seems, in fact, to be more complex. In India, "it is indisputable that land was, in absolute terms, hardly under great pressure from population in the Deccan [peninsular interior of India] of the early British period." Through the 1840s, at least, "only about half of the cultivable land in most Deccan districts, according to formal British estimates, was being tilled." Although population grew rapidly in the 1850s and 1860s, the demographic boom came to an abrupt halt with the famine catastrophe of 1876. In India as a whole during the half-century between 1879 and 1920, there was only a single decade (the 1880s) of significant population growth. South Asia's percentage of world population declined during the years 1750 to 1900 from 23% to 20%, while Europe's rose from 17% to 21%.

Modern case-studies corroborate the position of critics of British rule, like G V Josh in 1890, who argued that "the problem of India lies not so much in the fact of an alleged overpopulation as in the admitted and patent evil of underproduction." Josh estimated that fully half the net savings of India was confiscated as revenue. If cultivators in the Deccan and other drought-prone regions were relentlessly pushed onto marginal lands where productivity was low and crop failures were inevitable, the culprit was less likely overpopulation than the "British land revenue system itself". Economic historian Amiya Bagchi made a careful study of colonial agricultural statistics and argues that revenue collectors' inflexible claims on a high "average" harvest compelled the peasants to cultivate marginal lands, and also forced them to "mine" their land in a situation where most of them had few investible resources left to improve its productivity.

...Europe faced even more severe demographic and ecological pressures at the beginning of the 19th century, but was able to resolve them with the help of New World natural resources, massive colonial emigration and, eventually, urban industrialisation.

The irrigation deficit

There is another variable frequently missing from historical discussions of "underdevelopment": water. "Up to half of the populations of Asia, Africa and South America may have subsisted on land where water supply constituted the key constraint upon increasing agricultural output." This was common sense to "Oriental despots". A major achievement of the Qing Golden Age, as well as of the Mogul zenith, had been the high sustained levels of state and village-level investment in flood control and irrigation. The 19th century, however, was characterised by the near-collapse of hydraulic improvement in India and China.

Public works in post-Mutiny India were driven first by the exigencies of military control and, second, by the demands of export agriculture. On the eve of the 1876 famine, 29% of Indian public-works capital was invested in military installations in contrast to only 21% for irrigation, canals and drainage. The railway system, meanwhile, consumed (to 1880) 13 times as

much investment as all hydraulic works. In the 1880-95 period, still only about one-fifth of public works expenditure found its way to major irrigation projects, 90% of which was concentrated in the Punjab and the North-West Provinces where canals, tapping the Ganges and Jamuna rivers, watered commercial crops like cotton, opium, sugarcane and wheat and financial returns to the government were therefore highest. By accelerating the marginalisation of kharif crops, export-oriented canal agriculture may well have made producers more vulnerable to famine.

The British enthusiasm for revenue-generating irrigation in the Punjab and North-West Provinces was counterbalanced by their disregard for the small-scale, peasant-managed irrigation systems of wells, dams, small channels and tanks (small reservoirs) that had been the hydraulic backbone of agriculture in western and southern India since the early medieval period. In stark contrast to the old Mogul tradition of subsidising well construction, ryots in British India who sank wells at their own expense on their own land were punitively taxed. Thus "[t]raditional water-harvesting systems disintegrated and disappeared in large parts of India during the early colonial period [and] high rates of land-tax left no surplus for the effective maintenance of irrigation systems."

The land-tax system also destroyed the social mechanisms that had allowed villages to undertake irrigation works by themselves. In most of India, water had always been a communally managed common resource. "Generally, there was no notion of selling titles to land and its water resources." In British common law as witlessly applied to India, however, water rights went along with the land titles as private property. "In effect, this meant that only those who owned land had a right to the water on it. In this way, all those who did not hold colonial land-deeds were excluded from access to water." Tanks and wells were also privatised, with the consequence that "for the first time ... water scarcity became a problem and this caused enormous hardship to the people and cattle alike."

Indeed, British rule, in various ways, emancipated local political chiefs from their obligation to invest in community resources and public institutions such as tank systems. The shortfall was not made good by the government's own public works. In Gujarat in the west, new property forms freed village caste-elites from traditional reciprocities and encouraged them to exploit irrigation resources to their selfish advantage. Entitlement to water thus openly became a relation of inequality and a means of exploitation. The British constantly complained about the "inertia" of India, but when it came to potentially life-saving local public works, they themselves were the embodiment of decisive inaction. The refusal of the state to support local irrigation became a smouldering grievance everywhere in interior India.

This irrigation deficit undergirded the Malthusian illusion of helpless "involution" in China and elsewhere. Whether as a result of population pressure or displacement by export crops, subsistence in India and China was pushed onto drier, often less productive soils, highly vulnerable to ENSO cycles, without parallel improvements in irrigation, drainage or reforestation to ensure sustainability. Modern irrigation-based revolutions in

agricultural productivity in northern India and north China (since 1960) only dramatise the centrality of water resources and the political capacities to ensure their development to any discussion of "carrying capacity" or "demographic ceilings".

Ecological poverty and enclosure

More broadly, any attempt to elucidate the social origins of late-19th century subsistence crises must integrally incorporate the relevant histories of common property resources (watersheds, aquifers, forests and pastures) and social overhead capital (irrigation and flood control systems, granaries, canals and roads). Ecological poverty -- the depletion or loss of entitlement to the natural resource base of traditional agriculture -- constituted a causal triangle with increasing household poverty and state decapacitation in explaining both the emergence of a "Third World" and its vulnerability to extreme climate events.

In India, as elsewhere in monsoonal Asia, village economy augmented crops and handicrafts with stores of free goods from common lands: dry grass for fodder, shrub grass for rope, wood and dung for fuel, dung, leaves and forest debris for fertilizer, clay for plastering houses, and, above all, clean water. All classes utilised these common property resources, but for poorer households they constituted the very margin of survival. Moreover, forest and pasture commons "not only serve as a buffer against seasonal shortages, but also contribute to rural equity."

The British consolidated their rule in India by transferring control of these strategic resources from the village community to the state. "Among all the interventions into village society that nurtured the Anglo-Indian empire, dividing public from private land stands out as the most important." Common lands -- or "waste" in the symptomatic vocabulary of the British Raj -- were either transformed into taxable private property or state monopolies. Free goods, in consequence, became either commodities or contraband. As in Britain during the previous centuries, the enclosure of common resources deeply undermined traditional household ecology.

Until 1870, all forests (20% of India's land area) had been communally managed. For plough agriculturalists, the forests were not only essential for wood, but also for leaf manure and grass and leaf fodder. By the end of 1870, they had been mostly enclosed by armed agents of the state. The overriding interest of the British was "to assure a continuing supply of wood for imperial needs": shipbuilding, urban construction and, above all, the railways, as well as vast quantities of wood for fuel. Even in the midst of the most terrible famines, the foresters prevented local residents from gathering fodder for their dying cattle or firewood to heat their homes.

The British also cut off communal access to grassland resources and dissolved the ancient ecological interdependence of pastoralists and farmers. After the 1857 Mutiny, the British pursued a relentless campaign, especially in the Deccan, against nomad and shifting cultivators whom they labelled as "criminal tribes".. Although the agroecology of the Deccan for centuries had been dependent upon the symbiosis of peasant

and nomad, upon valley agriculture and hill-slope pastoralism, the colonial state's voracious appetite for new revenue generated irresistible pressure on the ryots to convert "waste" into taxable agriculture. Punitive grazing taxes drove pastoralists off the land, while cultivators were lured into the pastoral margins with special leases.

The traditional Deccan practices of extensive crop rotation and long fallow, which required large farm acreages and plentiful manuring, became difficult to maintain as the land became more congested and cattle less numerous. Between 1843 and 1873, cattle numbers in the Deccan fell by almost 5 million. The 1876-78 drought killed off several million more, with cattle populations plummeting by nearly 60% in some districts. After comparable destruction during the 1896-97 drought, "women were seen to be pulling the plough" in some districts in the south-east Punjab.

The decline in labour productivity entailed by fewer and less powerful plough-cattle was matched by a corresponding fall in soil fertility because of the growing shortage of fertiliser. Irrigation water alone was of little value if the soil was depleted of nitrogen. The pasture soils eroded quickly and soon became useless for agriculture or grazing. "Commercialised agriculture, in tandem with a largely subsistence-oriented cultivation of foodgrains, produced a particularly intensive regime of soil depletion and erosion."

.....In the half-century when peacetime famine disappeared permanently from Western Europe, it increased devastatingly throughout much of the colonial world. Despite smug claims about the life-saving benefits of steam transportation and modern grain markets, millions, especially in British India, died near railway tracks or grain depots ...

At issue are not "lands of famine" becalmed in stagnant backwaters of world history, but the fate of tropical humanity during those years 1870-1914 when its labour and products were being conscripted into a London-centred world economy. Millions died, not outside the modern world system, but in the very process of being forcibly incorporated into its economic and political structures. They died in the golden age of liberal capitalism; many were murdered by the application of utilitarian free trade principles. The route to this "new world order" is thus paved with the bodies of the poor...

Extracted from 'The Origins of the Third World: Markets, States and Climate' by Mike Davis, Corner House Briefing Paper 27, www.thecornerhouse.org.uk. This briefing is an edited extract of Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World by Mike Davis, published in 2001 by Verso, London and New York.

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Along the famished road

Vidarbha has been ripped apart by an onslaught of devastating policies. Thousands of desperate farmers have committed suicide. Indebtedness, hunger and ill health are common. The government has announced empty packages but refuses to address the real issues such as declining support prices, an influx of imports, a shift to cash crops, rising input costs and cutbacks on credit. In this complex spiral, the food security of food producers themselves has been compromised

**JAIDEEP
HARDIKAR**

A man's photograph hangs on the wall of a cramped hut that you must bend down to enter. An old man gets up, battling the pain in his back. His wife, lying listlessly on the mud floor, does not make the effort. In an adjoining room, their daughter makes a futile bid to search for tea. The utensils are empty.

This tableau of a peasant family that has depended on land all its life for survival, is not uncommon in Vegaon village in the cotton-producing Yavatmal district of Vidarbha. This is ground zero of farmers' suicides. The family can no longer survive on the same piece of land. Things have gone terribly wrong.

"We have seen droughts, we have seen floods, we have seen natural crop losses, we have seen pest attacks, but this is something different," murmurs the old man, as I squat on the floor to check if his wife is alive. She is, barely. The frail couple is unable to visit a doctor. The photograph on the wall is their second son. The old man has not eaten enough since this son committed suicide a year ago, unable to bear the mounting debt and biting distress.

In another family in the same village, a father and son killed themselves within the span of one year, leaving behind two widows at the mercy of moneylenders, an unheeding government, and the world's new religion, the 'market'.

Vidarbha, the eastern region of Maharashtra, is an agrarian volcano. Cotton farmers here are committing suicide at an alarming frequency. The agrarian crisis of the region has transformed the green fields into killing fields. Over the last four years, at least 2,000 farmers have ended their lives in a region once rich in cotton, paddy, soybean and oranges. Those who are holding on have little hope of lifting themselves out of the crisis unless the state hikes investment in the agriculture sector and takes steps to correct its skewed policies.

After Prime Minister Manmohan Singh toured Vidarbha on July 1, 2006 and shared, as he put it, "the pain of the farmers of the region", there were at least 170 suicides within two months. The PM seems to have missed sharing the farmers' real concerns of declining prices for their produce, growing imports, falling incomes and surging production costs. Had he really listened, the farmers might have felt hopeful about the revival of their sagging agrarian economy.

Committees and study groups by the dozens have studied the problem in detail and recommended dozens of corrective steps. So far, the government has shown no real willingness to address the situation. Meanwhile, the distress continues to

devour the region. As Vijay Jawandhia, farmers' leader and an expert on agriculture, puts it: "The farmers who are living, are living just because they are not dying."

The malady in Vidarbha is not an outcome of successive drought or crop failure, but an onslaught of policies. The ruthless 'open market' policies of the past decade are pushing farmers to the brink. The shift from food crop to cash crop, for example, was not a coincidence but a direct outcome of policy. Vidarbha saw a dramatic decline in the number of acres of jowar cultivation from 30% in 1995 to less than 3% in 2005. While jowar prices have remained the same for decades at Rs 550 a quintal, its consumption has declined.

Noted ecologist Dr Sultan Ismail says, "In Maharashtra, people grew millets. But agriculture departments working as extension workers for seed corporations advised them to stop growing millets and start growing soybean, because they would get more money. So they went in for cotton or soybean."

The losses soon surfaced. While growing millets, the farmers got foliage that became fodder for the cattle, which in turn produced dung to make compost, which then went back into the farmers' fields. When soya came to the market, the soya oil went to some factory, the soya cake was exported to the US for feeding pigs, the cattle had nothing to eat and the soil had no dung as fertiliser. It started to lose its fertility and a well-balanced cycle started to spin in the wrong way.

Pulses, which were also a significant crop, are now used for intercropping with cotton, the region's mainstay crop. The decline in food production has a direct link to the government's crossover to export-oriented policies, which push for cash crops at the peril of food crops. This deliberately pursued policy took ten years to roll out the crisis. Once the crises started to steadily unfurl in Vidarbha, farmers began committing suicide in increasing numbers.

As cash crops ate into the acreage of food crop, particularly jowar, families lost out on several fronts. After losing vital fodder for cattle, they eventually lost the cattle. The number of slaughterhouses in Vidarbha has increased in the last two years. Vidarbha now exports meat to the Middle East even as India promotes the import of cotton. The loss of cattle has meant a loss of subsidiary income. This, in turn, means a drop in the family's income.

Indebtedness has grown alarmingly in the same phase. The

rural credit systems collapsed when the government neglected the agriculture sector throughout the 1990s. The per capita debt of farmers has grown phenomenally. In rural India you might have to pay up to 300% interest to your lender in a season. In such a scenario, the smallest natural trigger poses great risks for families.

In this complex spiral, food security has been compromised. “Many farmers and families are able to eat only once a day,” Sanjay Thakre, 27, told us last year during our visit to Akola’s Dahihanda village during the Ganesh festival. Sanjay’s uncle Ganesh Thakre, 45, took his life by consuming pesticide on the eve of the installation of the Ganesh idol. Deep in debt, Thakre had got trapped in a usurious system of *bhisi*, a sort of chit-fund that is largely rigged in these parts by moneylenders.

Ganesh’s widow Rekha spoke of the family’s decreasing food intake. “We can’t afford to eat well,” she said. Ironically, the Thakres were not eligible for the BPL (below poverty line) card that would have enabled them to buy foodgrains from the public ration shops. As Jawandhia remarks: “It’s an irony that food producers are starving while purchasers have stocks beyond consumption limit.”

After they stopped growing cereals, the farmers’ dependence on the market for cereals and pulses, even for household consumption, has grown. This has triggered inflation due to

mounting demand. At the same time, the centre’s policy of abandoning the universal Public Distribution System (PDS) and pushing for a targeted PDS has meant certain disaster for the poorest of poor farming families. Hundreds of cotton growers have found themselves out of the PDS network. They have had to fall back on the market for domestic consumption and this comes with an unusually high price.

Those who don’t commit suicide, starve to death, Kishor Tiwari, convener of the Vidarbha Jan Andolan Samiti, a farmers’ movement in Pandharkawda, Yavatmal, says. Two years ago, Kolam adivasis in three districts of western Vidarbha starved to death. That prompted the Bombay High Court to direct the government to supply food free of cost to the starving families. In 2006 the problem of starvation has been checked in that community, but in other communities, especially of dalits and backward classes, people are rotating hunger by fasting.

“We integrated a low-cost rural economy with the high-cost global economy, but lifted whatever little protection our farmers enjoyed. When the developed world pays huge subsidies to its farmers, this is bound to be disastrous for our farmers,” explains Jawandhia. “You belted his food economy and lured him into growing capital-intensive cash crops, but refused him institutional credit to match the growing production costs. Usury would obviously spread.”



A well-known medical practitioner in Nagpur, Dr Milind Mane, says, "Food intake in many villages has gone down, and that's the reason why nutritional deficiencies have left many villagers vulnerable to even a routine viral fever." Since June, an unprecedented outbreak of a fever called chikungunya has affected tens of thousands of farming households in the cotton belt of Vidarbha. Many have died due to lack of medical attention. "If attended to, this fever subsides in four-five days like a routine viral fever," Dr Mane says.

But many farmers could not afford to see a doctor and paid with their lives. Others had to sell their land to pay for medical bills, even as a fragile public health system failed to provide healthcare to rural Vidarbha. Health expenditure is now a major component of monthly spending for a farm household, according to Tiwari.

The agrarian crisis in Vidarbha is linked to all these interlocking strands. Another such strand is the rising input prices and declining output prices. "The farmers are at a loss on the day they start sowing," Tiwari points out. "The more they do intensive farming, the more they end up with losses. Today, everyone is in the same boat - small, marginal and big farmers."

So the devastation caused by the crisis in poor farm families continues, unabated. When a 19-year-old student committed suicide in Amravati, she wrote a suicide note in her neat handwriting. She said if it weren't her, it would, most certainly, have to be her father. The girl knew her parents were worried about her marriage. She has left behind two sisters.

In a village in Yavatmal, the villagers collected money to cremate a farmer. He had consumed pesticide to put an end to an endless streak of indebtedness. It was a funeral for the entire village, the sarpanch said.

At the beginning of this season, two young farmers committed suicide within months of their fathers doing the same. Two widows were left behind in each house. In many other homes, widows too have ended their lives, unable to bear the burden of raising the hungry kids. Cotton has never burnt with such vehemence in Vidarbha. And its flames are threatening to engulf the paddy cultivating districts in the eastern parts as well as the orange orchards.

Amidst all this despair, a section of private moneylenders, government officials, contractors, food merchants and banks have had a grand feast. Their earnings have burgeoned. Land grabs have soared. Cuts in compensation, bounties in contracts, and exploitation of hapless women - the ubiquitous market and its zealous promoters at ground zero have fully exploited the situation.

Meanwhile, the government has chosen to announce special packages instead of correcting the devastating policies that are causing the crisis. It has punished small-time moneylenders instead of caning the giant loan sharks, who sit sometimes on its own treasury benches. It has refused to pay a farmer a small and legitimate price but waived hundreds of crores of rupees on excise and taxes for the corporate rich. It has paid for the metropolis's wasteful extravagance while being in a tearing hurry to withdraw whatever little the villagers enjoyed.

On December 10, 2005, Chief Minister Vilasrao Deshmukh announced a Rs. 1,075 crore package. The PM visited the region on July 1, 2006. Between these two events, nearly 500 farmers committed suicide. Each package has fuelled more suicides. Each time, the farmers expected steps to mitigate the crisis. Each time, that did not happen.

The packages announced by the state and central governments skirted fundamental policies such as increasing the Minimum Support Prices, taking into consideration the huge subsidies being given by the developed world to its farmers and the resultant volatility in the international markets, or the policies that promote the imports that crush local markets and thousands of cultivators.

The CM's so-called package is empty. The withdrawal of the advance bonus in 2005 by the government from the Monopoly Cotton Procurement Scheme, accounted for a loss of Rs 1,000 crore to cotton farmers in 2005-06. "The government first withdrew this money from the pockets of peasants, and later announced a package of Rs 1,075 crore," Jawandhia says. A major chunk of the Rs 1,075 crore package was the farmers' own money, deducted by the government for capital formation and a price fluctuation fund till 1995. This money lay unused with the government.

The restoration of an advance bonus would have meant at least an addition of Rs 500 per quintal for the farmers, which in a year of increased production costs could have made some difference to each farming family. Even the PM's much-trumpeted package for Vidarbha was expected to offer the farmers some incentive to grow food crops. This didn't even find a mention. The package includes Rs 180 crore for a seed-replacement programme, not for food crops.

"There's no relation between prices and suicides," Maharashtra's Deputy Chief Minister R R Patil argued in December 2005. "Last year (2004), when we gave good prices, farm suicides were even more. This year, when we reduced the prices, the rate of suicides has dropped," he had told a rally in Nagpur.

The government knows that prices, among other factors, are the key to addressing the problem. But they have not budged. It may be that the economic wizard, Dr Manmohan Singh, has a better idea of dealing with such a gigantic problem without any real changes in policy. With the farmer's messiah, Sharad Pawar, in tow, we should all rest in peace. By the end of the year, band aid-like packages could outnumber the total number of states in India.

Meanwhile in Vidarbha's dusty countryside, the bonds continue to crumble. The farmers' confidence is shattered, their resilience has worn thin. There's no ray of hope, no light. The ebullient media industry could hardly be bothered to consistently focus on this tragedy. And Vidarbha is not an exception. The agrarian crisis is occurring all over our agrarian country. It's not the beginning and it won't be the end.

Jaideep Hardikar is a Nagpur-based journalist who has been covering the agrarian crisis in Vidarbha for a number of years.

Pitfalls of the second green revolution

A wide range of policies and the second 'Green Revolution' that the government is introducing in conjunction with Indian corporate houses, American agribusinesses and food multinationals, will have a catastrophic impact on Indian farmers, on sustainability and on food security. The effects are already evident in states like Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh

**DEVINDER
SHARMA**

Forty years after the first Green Revolution, Indian agriculture is in the midst of an unprecedented crisis. Unmindful of the destruction caused by the technology used for the 'revolution', the impact of which is being felt all over the country - drastically declining yields, soil gasping for breath - India is preparing to introduce a second Green Revolution that will push farmers out of agriculture altogether.

Some years ago, a former vice-president of the World Bank and the then chairman of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), Dr Ismail Serageldin, made a presentation at a conference in Chennai. What he revealed did not come as a shock. Quoting a 1995 World Bank study, he said that the number of people migrating from rural areas to urban centres in India by the year 2010 would be twice the combined population of UK, France and Germany - that is, close to 200 million.

In other words, 400 million people are expected to be taking now and in the near future the distress migration route, migrating from rural areas in search of menial jobs in the sprawling urban conglomerates. It has been estimated that by 2020, India could have the world's largest number of megacities, with populations of over 10 million each. Seventy per cent of Tamil Nadu, for example, will live in these urban centres.

Numerous national policies are being recast at a frantic pace and are facilitating this distress. The underlying objective is clear in policies related to seed, water, biodiversity, adivasis, the environment, biotechnology, trade, food safety and agriculture, amongst others - make way for the big agro-industries.

With the support of a political system cutting across party colours, Indian industry and business are upbeat about the potential of agriculture. A slew of FICCI-sponsored 'reforms' for raising farm incomes plans to pump large amounts of public money into an industry-driven agriculture, while the farmer survives on the margins. The 'reforms' are clearly not aimed at resurrecting agriculture but at bringing profits for the owners of the industries.

Policies that encourage contract farming, future trading in agricultural commodities, leasing of land, the formation of land-sharing companies, allotment of homestead-garden plots, direct procurement of farm commodities and the setting up of special purchase centres, will all drive a majority of India's 60 crore farmers out of agriculture.

The process has already begun. The agricultural reforms that are being introduced in the name of increasing food production and minimising the price risks that farmers continue to face are actually destroying the land's capacity to produce and further marginalising farming communities.

Industry-driven agriculture will aggravate the existing agrarian crisis. The new technology that the multinationals, as well as the Indian Council for Agricultural Research (ICAR), plan to introduce, will keep a majority of farmers outside its ambit. 'Precision farming' is one such technology that is getting the government's budgetary support. Other 'reforms', such as removing the bottlenecks in the commodity supply chain by amending the APMC Act and enlarging the scope of future trading are also aimed at helping agribusinesses.

In pursuit of this World Bank model of agriculture, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh invested huge amounts into industry-driven agriculture. This led to an environmental catastrophe and destroyed millions of rural livelihoods. The rate of farmer suicides in both states has been increasing.

Both states have made it smoother for big agri-industry (backed by foreign financial institutions and international banks) to move into the rural areas. Andhra Pradesh's Vision 2020 document talked of reducing the number of farmers in the state to 40% of the population, but did not have any significant programme to rehabilitate the 30% of the farming population that would be driven off the land.

The Rs 1,000-crore Indo-US Knowledge Initiative in Agricultural Research and Education, launched by American President George Bush in Hyderabad on March 3, is expected to bring Indian agriculture under the direct control of US corporate groups. If the first Green Revolution was facilitated by the introduction of the land grant system of agricultural research and education, the second Green Revolution is being tailored to the needs of American corporate interests.

In 2005, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Bush signed a farm technology agreement. Addressing a joint session of the US Congress, the PM said, "The Green Revolution lifted countless millions above poverty... I am very happy to say that US President George Bush and I have decided to launch a second generation of India-US collaboration in agriculture."

The agreement was prepared without transparency and its details have been kept confidential. Two multinational

giant supermarket leader Wal-Mart and the seed multinational Monsanto are part of this Indo-US initiative. The two multinationals have already said they are not interested in research and development but in the increased trading opportunities that India offers.

One implicit objective of such agreements is a transfer of the unwanted and risk-laden technology of genetic engineering of plant and animal species. The US sees India as an easy dumping ground and has used the World Trade Organisation (WTO) to ask India why it is curtailing the import of genetically modified food. The process is being put in place without first ascertaining the reasons for the terrible agrarian crisis, which in part is due to the imposition of an alien and damaging technology.

This 'knowledge initiative' is, however, a boost for the cash-starved ICAR, the umbrella organisation for agricultural research and education in India. It will give plant scientists an opportunity to justify the huge public sector investment in the monolithic and gasping research institution. The ICAR has clearly shifted its goalpost from subsistence to commercial farming.

Even in America, the entry of retail chains in the agricultural sector has transferred the profits to a clutch of middlemen-retailers, processors, certification agencies, quality controllers and others. Farmers earn only 4% from whatever they sell. In 1990, farmers could earn as much as 70% from their sales. In Canada, the National Farmers Union has shown in a study how the combined profits of 70 retail and agribusiness firms have multiplied while the farmers' losses have mounted. The same model is now being shifted to India.

Nowhere in the world has big agribusiness worked in real cooperation with farmers. In North America and Europe, agribusiness companies have pushed farmers out of agriculture. Only 900,000 farming families are left on the farms in the US. In 15 countries of the European Union, the number of farmers has dwindled to less than 7 million. The underlying message is crystal clear: farmers should get out of agriculture. A similar process will lead to a catastrophe in India, worsening food insecurity and multiplying hunger.

As part of the process, the Economic Survey 2005-06 categorically talks of dismantling the minimum support price (MSP) and the procurement-based food subsidy system in India. This will enable the food retailers to directly purchase from farmers. In other words, Indian farmers will have to face not only the vagaries of the monsoon but also of the market. The Economic Advisory Council to the prime minister has prepared a report that calls for a shift in price policy leaving the farmers at the mercy of the market forces.

In a country where land holdings are meagre, the big challenge lies in making agriculture more sustainable for the small and marginal farmers. In the former Green Revolution areas of Punjab, Haryana, western Uttar Pradesh, parts of Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, agriculture faces a severe crisis of sustainability. Punjab and Haryana are fast heading towards desertification—a process that renders the land unable to sustain the production levels achieved during the 'revolution'.



The answer does not lie in allowing private corporations to take over through contract farming. Private businesses enter agriculture with the specific objective of garnering more profits from the same piece of land. Contract farming has already done irreparable damage to agriculture in countries like the Philippines, Zimbabwe, Argentina and Mexico.

The private corporations, as experiences in other countries show, bank on intensified farming practices, drain the soil of nutrients, suck groundwater in a few years and leave the once-fertile lands almost barren after four or five years. They are then likely to hand back the barren and unproductive land to the farmers who leased it to them and move to another fertile piece of land.

This is already happening in many parts of India. Contract farming accentuates the crisis of sustainability by destroying whatever remains of the land's production capacity. The monoculture methods of contract corporate farming destroy biodiversity in the region, which further affects long-term sustainability. Contract farming is the modern version of 'slash and burn' agriculture.

It took decades to realise that the technology promoted by the USAID and unthinkingly followed by national agricultural research systems in developing countries, was disastrous. This realisation came about after the technology had already inflicted irreparable damage on human health and the environment. It would be dangerous to believe that the second Green Revolution promoted by the United States, that is being allowed through open doors into India by the government, will not leave behind still more damaging consequences.

We must ask several pertinent questions: how will the second Green Revolution aggravate the existing agrarian crisis? Will it push farmers out of agriculture and allow agribusinesses to take possession of the farm land and then destroy its production capacity? Will it not displace and drive out farmers and create an enabling environment only for agro-industries? With what untold consequences will the vital power to produce food be shifted into the profiteering hands of multinational food giants?

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Signing the wrong contract

Many states in India are promoting contract farming, ostensibly to allow “technology transfer, capital inflow and an assured market” for crops. This means letting retailers and global corporations enter into profitable agreements that are detrimental to the farmer. By ignoring the better option of cooperative farming, which has proved beneficial to farmers, the government is placing Indian agriculture and food production at great risk

**SUDHIRENDAR
SHARMA**

Maharashtra will soon join the ranks of Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Karnataka, Punjab and Tamil Nadu in promoting contract farming. This move is ostensibly aimed at bailing out the farming community from its distress, manifested in the number of unprecedented farmer suicides in the state in recent months. The state government has proposed an amendment to the Maharashtra Agriculture Produce Marketing Act to allow corporations, retailers or food processing companies to directly enter into agreements with farmers to market their produce.

The corporate sector has been the first to rejoice, much before the farmers who are the supposed beneficiaries of the new Act. Multinational giants like Metro Cash & Carry, Cargill Foods, Hypercity, Shoppers' Stop and Wal-Mart have signalled their intention to get into agreements with Maharashtra's farmers. Even the Minister for Marketing, Harshvardhan Patil, could not hide the truth when he said, "The decision will be a boost for the food industry and retail chain majors."

The stakes are high in the emerging market. Big Indian companies are also rushing into agriculture. India has fertile land and tropical fruit, rice and spices that are considered among the best in the world. For example, Reliance Industries has been luring farmers in Haryana to part with their lands.

India's peasant-led agrarian economy is therefore at a crossroads. The peasants who fought the European opium and indigo planters during the historic Champaran Satyagraha of 1917 are up against neo-imperialist forces that are once again out to establish their dominance over Indian agriculture. But this time around, they do not enjoy the support of powerful people within the country.

After the satyagraha of 1917, a radical reform in agrarian relations was advocated. Without reforms, the problems of poverty would not be solved. The Congress then had emphatically declared, "The final solution to this problem involves the removal of British imperialistic exploitation and a radical change in the antiquated and repressive land tenure and revenue systems."

A case for cooperative farming was made at that time. Peasant proprietorship was not questioned, but they said, "Progressive agriculture as well as the creation of new social values and incentives may require some system of cooperative farming suited to local conditions." Experimental farms were talked about to demonstrate the virtues of cooperative farming.

The post-independence years saw a dramatic shift in the pro-poor agrarian policy. It had faced stiff resistance from the bureaucracy, politicians and the land-

owning lobby. Consequently, from the early-1960s, Indian agriculture has implicitly promoted corporate farming and global integration of agribusinesses.

Much of this has been at the cost of the poor and marginal farmers. Rising input costs and falling output prices are threatening the viability of cultivation. The government has failed to protect farmers against competition from highly subsidised production in the developed world. It has opened up the farm sector and allowed private traders to tap its resources for their own profit.

The results have been evident in increasing suicides by farmers, large-scale migration and a decline in output from peasant-driven decentralised agriculture. Prof. Amartya Sen has expressed great disquiet at this growing distress: "Our vision of India cannot be one that is half California and half-sub Saharan Africa."

But the Indian government's National Agriculture Policy continues to promote the private sector in agriculture. The policy envisages that "private sector participation, through contract farming and land leasing arrangements, will allow accelerated technology transfer, capital inflow and an assured market for crop production, especially of oilseeds, cotton and horticultural crops."

The world of corporate farming is thus growing in India. Its seeds have been systematically sown to justify bringing our decentralised agrarian economy under the centralised control of corporate agriculture. As the corporate takeover spreads, it is critical to assess its impact on the lives of farmers.

Corporate farming is defined as a system for the production and supply of agricultural or horticultural products under forward contracts between producers and buyers. It is a commitment made by the cultivator to provide an agricultural commodity of a certain type, and in the quantity required by a committed buyer, typically a large company. The farmer is required to plant the contractor's crop on his land and harvest and deliver a certain amount of produce based upon anticipated yield and contracted acreage.

The terms of the contract may differ according to variations in the nature of crops to be grown and the conditions levied by

both the company and the farmers. What is certain is that farmers lose their sovereign rights over what to grow and how to grow. The trading companies control the prices and the market. This is also known as 'forced commercialisation'. In Punjab, contract farming has only helped corporations to control farm operations and make profits. The Amarinder Singh government's obsession with diversification of crops has exposed farmers to the vagaries of corporate interests in the state. The idea that excess water-reliant crops like wheat and paddy would get replaced through contract farming has not worked because much of the recent corporate interest in Punjab is in basmati, which is a water-

guzzler. Growing incidents of pre-determined prices being reduced on the pretext of inferior quality of the grain or crop, are adding to the farmers' problems.

Diversification—which is sustainable and helps conserve resources like soil and water—could have been more effectively encouraged by a relative pricing policy and a support system of public agricultural extension services. In reality, the decline of such services has allowed the easy entry of private traders. The states that are encouraging contract farming are in fact easing the pressure on state finances by eliminating subsidies and farm support prices.

In Andhra Pradesh, about Rs 964 lakh was invested to pilot contract farming on 200 acres of land in Kuppam, the then Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu's constituency. The place has become a laboratory of technological options at the cost of the farmers' interests. Corporatisation of farming has had a similar impact in the US, where consumer expenditure on food has grown without concurrent gains in farm receipts and with a long-term enriching of the corporations.

Wherever contract farming has been practiced in India, similar experiences have surfaced. Skewed investment outlays, misdirected subsidies and faulty procurement policies have been the outcomes of the fallacious assumption that corporate agriculture can pull the sector out of its slump.

While corporate farming has gained political patronage in developing countries, agriculture cooperatives hold the dominant market share in the European Union. Between 60-75% of the market share in the grain trade is held by agricultural cooperatives in Denmark, France, Ireland, Austria and Sweden. Cooperatives also play a major role in trading dairy products, fruits, vegetables and meat in the EU and the US—as much as, for example, 90-100% of the share in dairy products in Denmark, Finland, UK and Ireland.

Even at the peak of the corporate engagement in agriculture in the US, agricultural cooperatives have been able to slice out a 38% share of the market in trading grains. Cooperatives have an edge over corporate farming in channelling profits to the producers. They signify the value of 'farmer-owned firms' as opposed to an 'investor-owned system'.

Agricultural economists have studied the cooperative inter-dependence of farm production and marketing since the early-1930s, but the commodity-driven agro-

industrialisation model has often led to the vertical integration of markets at the farm level. Now economists have begun to re-position cooperative coordination ahead of market coordination: it gives farmers the voice and choice to be part of a 'service at cost' principle that makes members liable to incur profits or losses.

The push to liberalise and privatise in countries such as India during the 1990s may have forced food systems researchers to bypass the cooperative model. Growing corporate influences have underplayed the significance of cooperatives. The same corporate interests are now eyeing the milk cooperatives of Gujarat.

Collective response

The small size of holdings is a key factor in unproductive harvests. About 2,400 small farmers of Thrissur in Kerala have demonstrated the virtues of cooperative farming. The Adat Farmers Cooperative Bank (AFCB) is supporting their experiment in cooperative organic paddy cultivation.

The shrinking size of landholdings due to family divisions meant a shift to crops other than paddy, as cultivation became less remunerative. Kerala was sourcing about 75% of its annual requirements of 40 lakh tonnes from other states. The AFCB cooperative venture has proved that small plots can be assets if jointly cultivated. In a farming cooperative, the members pool their holdings. They jointly cultivate the land, using improved practices and receiving wages for their daily labour. When the produce is sold at the end of the season, members get a dividend in proportion to the area of land contributed by them, and a share of the income from the produce proportionate to the labour that was contributed. Cooperative farming eases pressure on its members by making joint purchases of seeds, fertilisers or equipment and by undertaking land improvement work. The Bank had constituted nine farmers' committees to undertake the cultivation, from pumping out the water from the paddy fields to harvesting the crop. AFCB distributed Rs 1.5 crore to the farmers as interest-free loans of Rs 6,000 each. It purchased seeds and all other inputs. The total cost after harvesting was Rs 2.10 crore. The sales will generate about Rs 5.10 crore. The balance of Rs 3 crore will be distributed among the farmers proportionate to their land holding. This could be a model worth emulating.

With an average landholding of below 0.1 hectare, cooperative farming in India could pull subsistence farming out of the current abyss. Ignoring such options, Haryana is on the verge of amending its Agriculture Market Produce Act in favour of contract farming, whereas Chhattisgarh has enacted the Land Lease Act 2005 to facilitate the transfer of land to corporations. Maharashtra is only the latest to encourage contract farming and serve corporate interests.

No lessons seem to have been learnt from past experiences and the experiences of the EU. A shift in policy in favour of farm cooperatives, along with the complementary support of inputs from public institutions and a reliable system of credit at reasonable rates of interest, is imperative. Without such changes, agriculture in India will slide further into an abyss.

No wheat to eat

RAHUL GOSWAMI

India is importing an unprecedented amount of wheat this year often sub-standard grain bought at high rates. Domestic stocks are low and the price of wheat is increasing. These are the effects of changes in policy dictated by big agribusinesses and global cartels, which lower procurement by the government, discourage buffer stocks, debilitate the Food Corporation of India, tear apart the PDS, and facilitate hoarding and then private trading. Caught in the global grain market, India's self-sufficiency in food is at great risk

Another dry news agency report went out to the world's newsrooms on August 21, 2006: "India will have to import more wheat to feed its more than 1 billion people before the next crop in March, [the] junior food minister said on Monday." In a few terse paragraphs, the Reuters report dealt with a move that is nothing less than a landmark in India's contemporary history of food sovereignty.

Since March 2006 India has floated tenders for the purchase of 3.8 million tonnes of wheat. Taken together with an earlier tranche of imports, this constitutes the biggest import of its kind in the last 30 years. Government stocks of wheat in the Central Pool were estimated at 8.2 million tonnes on July 1, nearly 9 million tonnes lower than the required level of 17.1 million tonnes on that date. Already, 0.5 million tonnes have been bought from the Australian Wheat Board. These purchases are part of the work-in-progress of the neo-liberal policy regime, guided by the logic of a predatory global market.

India needs to maintain a buffer stock to ensure adequate supplies for the country's poor and to keep market prices in check," the Reuters report blithely said. Ten weeks earlier, the leaders of the All India Agricultural Workers' Union (AIAWU) had written to Union Minister for Agriculture Sharad Pawar, protesting against the renewed practice of procuring grain from foreign traders. They also objected to the debilitating anti-people policies being pursued by Pawar's ministry and the UPA government in the name of "prudent food management".

"The government has asked the Australian Wheat Board to provide some 5 lakh tonnes of wheat at Rs 950 per quintal when they are mopping up the grain in our market at a good Rs 100 to Rs 150 less. Now, US companies with substandard wheat have strong-armed the STC for another contract of 30 lakh tonnes for which moisture content and safety norms have been inexplicably changed," the AIAWU letter says.

With stagnating wheat production, the danger level in self-sufficiency has already been crossed in India. The rate of growth of production has fallen below the rate of growth of population. Last year, the production of wheat reached a low of around 68.5 million tonnes. This year it is estimated to be 71 million tonnes.

Wheat deficits of 2 million tonnes below the buffer stock norm, which lead to imports, are a result of deliberate policies to cut

down on procurement on the one hand and to encourage private trade on the other. When wheat production was 69.8 million tonnes in 2001-02, procurement by state agencies was 20.6 million tonnes. This year, wheat production is estimated at 71.5 million tonnes and procurement has plummeted to 9.18 million tonnes.

"In addition to the requirements of wheat and rice under the targeted public distribution system, the Central Pool is required to have sufficient stocks of these in order to meet any emergencies like drought or failures of crop, as well as to enable open market intervention in case of a price rise," says the Department of Food and Public Distribution (DFPD) of the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution. But the ministry has ignored this critical responsibility.

Prices of wheat and other essential commodities have shot up in the last few months. At such a time, the government must make every effort to strengthen the PDS to ensure a buffer against starvation and further malnutrition for millions of families who are severely affected by even the slightest rise in prices of essential commodities. Data from the National Sample Survey shows that the share of expenditure on food is 60% or more for nine out of 10 rural households and for six out of 10 urban households. For poorer landless sections the amount spent on food goes up to 90%.

Against such a background, the DFPD recently recommended to the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs that the country needs "prudent food management with special reference to the management of wheat stocks". If its recommendations were accepted, it said, the wheat deficit of 5.9 million tonnes anticipated in April 2007 would be wiped out. This is being viewed as a brutal assault on food security by the left, by farmers' associations and critical observers of the process of globalisation in India. It is also contrary to the provisions of the UPA government's Common Minimum Programme.

Whatever the posturing of our government, the signals are clear. "A handful of countries are likely to be the main drivers behind next season's growth in world [grain] trade," observes FAO's 'Food Outlook' for June 2006. "In Asia, India is likely to lead the way with a sharp increase in imports. With rising domestic prices, low government stocks and tight supplies facing its public distribution system, India is expected to

purchase significant volumes of wheat from international markets for the first time in many years."

India's emergence as a major buyer in the world market was noted early by the United States Department of Agriculture. In its 'Grain: World Markets and Trade' circular of May 2006, the USDA commented: "With carry-in stocks very small (only 1.8 million tonnes compared to 23 million just five years ago), and a reduced harvest, prices have been climbing. Government procurement is far behind last year's level. As a result the government has announced its intention to conduct large-scale purchases from foreign suppliers."

A divisive logic has brought India to this juncture. The recommendations of the DFPD demonstrate this logic. Key recommendations include hiking the prices of foodgrains for BPL (below poverty line) and APL (above poverty line) categories, cutting allocations to both these sections of ration card holders, cutting the foodgrain component in all employment-generation schemes, and wiping out the wheat deficit by removing the food component in wages in central government employment schemes.

Meanwhile, State agencies have been battered by pro-business, pro-trade changes made to the Agricultural Produce Act. Private traders no longer need a licence or an accredited agent to buy foodgrains and pay none of the market fees which the Food Corporation of India (FCI) does; private traders can go into the market according to their own assessments while the FCI must bow before bureaucratic procedure; and private traders can go directly to the farmer while the FCI can only purchase from

registered markets. If the FCI had been given the 'level playing field' that the globalisers chant about, it would have been possible to avoid the dimly low procurement levels.

Indian agribusiness giants ITC and Reliance went into villages in Punjab and Haryana much before State agencies and offered farmers a price that was slightly higher than the Rs 650 per quintal official minimum support price. Farmers' associations reveal that representatives of the colossal US grain trading companies, Cargill and Archer Daniels Midland, conducted similar expeditions at the same time. Only after a large part of the produce had been cornered by the private sector, did the government offer a Rs 50 per quintal bonus.

The bonus was too late to be of any real use. It is also shockingly low when compared with the price paid to foreign traders for imported wheat about Rs 790 a quintal. The private sector traders have not only bought the wheat at prices only slightly higher than the minimum support price, they have also bought grain cheaply from farmers as many as 94% of farmers own less than 4 hectares each. They are hard pressed to sell immediately after the harvest, and are then forced to buy grain on credit to survive. This process has also benefited from the sanctioned-by-default hoarding which has pushed market prices up by Rs 5-6 a kilo.

No wonder the AIAWU was incensed. "Let it be clear that the sort of subsidies being provided ought to be increased and not decreased as is evident from the government's criminal policy of allowing... foreign grain companies to hoard grain at Rs 750 to Rs 850 per quintal from our markets and deprive the



government's own procurement agencies, which are only paying Rs 700 to Rs 750 per quintal and that too not cash down as government-permitted hoarders are doing," the union stated. It warned that this will "undoubtedly lead to spiralling grain prices and starvation of those unable to afford them."

Such stern caution may have carried some weight in normal circumstances. But these were not normal circumstances. Representatives of multinational grain companies are reported to have bluntly told government that large investments in grain trading in India would not be "sanctioned" by them unless "the potential threat posed by high stock levels is removed". These "high stock levels" were not those that the government and some planners were gloating about during 1997-2002. The MNCs were referring to the long-standing norms for how much minimum buffer stock should be maintained. The norm varies during the course of a year from 16 to 24 million tonnes. The traders want it to be drastically reduced.

They argue that if the FCI maintains enough stocks to control excessive price rise a role that the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution is duty-bound to perform, and for which the FCI is the primary agency -- that would pose a potential threat to their profits. Their counsel is that a small buffer stock should be maintained, which will suffice to tide over very short-term shortages and emergencies. They insist that the government can accomplish price intervention by resorting to imports, naturally from the same MNCs that also control the international grain trade. The logic of the world commodities markets is such that prices in the grain trade are likely to rise in response to increased demand from India. This would be hugely beneficial for the traders.

The attack on our buffer stocks is only one aspect of the effort to control global foodgrain procurement, price, movement and distribution. The PDS in India, even if inadequate, has been an obstacle to agribusiness MNCs. Their strategy is to foster conditions that suppress grain production in major developing countries. The MNCs work with multilateral funding agencies to dismantle the food security systems of those countries. From their perspective, any resulting suppression in demand for foodgrains and the catastrophic effects of this suppression on huge sections of the poor, is irrelevant. The oligopoly does not pursue size of trade but the extraction of higher profits even if on reduced sales.

At the farm gate and fair price shop, the AIAWU is as aware of the conditions as the government seems unaware of them. In the post-1991 liberalisation era in India, several million small and marginal farmers have lost land and farm work due to these conditions. A fatal interlinking of factors contributes to this destruction. People above the poverty line (APL) don't buy from the PDS simply because foodgrain is not available. Besides, APL cardholders in many states have been manoeuvred out of the food security system by statistical juggling. On the other hand, a 2005 Planning Commission evaluation shows that 57% of the poor from BPL categories were given APL cards.

Linked to the issue of weakened distribution and the slashing of allocations is the fate of the 483,000 fair-price shops in the

country. Madhura Swaminathan of the Indian Statistics Institute, Kolkata, and a member of the Committee on Long-Term Grain Policy, has presented evidence of ration shops being made unviable and closing down. This evidence comes from Kerala, the state with the most effective system of rationing. In the early-1990s, the average monthly sale of cereals in the state was 7,500 kilos of rice and 2,000 kilos of wheat per ration shop. By 2001, this had fallen to 1,400 kilos of rice and 200 kilos of wheat and many shops were making losses.

Independent of political hue, India's ruling juntas have adopted and pursued a cynical set of anti-people 'reforms'. In March 2001, a cusp year for India's food security, then Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee told a rural audience in Haryana that they must adjust to "global comparative advantage". He exhorted them to "look beyond wheat and paddy" and to switch to "horticulture, floriculture, oilseeds and vegetable production" which "have good export potential". The poor farmer, the erstwhile PM explained, had to respond to the growing pressures of the world market by producing less of food and more of cash crops.

In 2005-06, Finance Minister P Chidambaram's budget speech had a similar message. "More needs to be done," he said, to shift away from foodgrains. The Ministry of Agriculture would prepare a "roadmap for agricultural diversification". Accordingly, the largest hike in the agriculture budget is a new National Horticultural Mission, with an allocation of Rs 630 crore in 2005-06. Another Rs 400 crore is going to a new scheme to promote micro-irrigation targeted at the same sections engaged in 'diversified' commercial crops. This comprises about 62% of the increase in the allocation to agriculture. It will fuel the export market and processed food companies and supply the urban well-to-do. Such largesse has meant that allocations for foodgrain, oilseeds, cotton, animal husbandry, dairy development and fisheries activities that engage the overwhelming majority in agriculture are stagnant or reduced.

The wheat imports in 2006 symbolise the utter failure of India's neo-liberal food policies. Successive governments since 1991 have ruthlessly set out to dismantle, in collusion with global cartels and on the advice of brokers of volatile capital, a crucial component of India's self-reliance: food self-sufficiency.

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Food at stake

Ten years after the dismantling of the universal public distribution system (PDS), the statistical jugglery of the targeted food distribution system actually excludes millions of poor in both the BPL and APL categories. Targeting is linked to neoliberal policies that seek to limit, if not eliminate, the government's welfare responsibilities

BRINDA KARAT

People may find it strange that the union finance minister could ask for votes in his home state of Tamil Nadu on the promise of providing rice at Rs 2 a kilo for the entire population, but should practise the opposite when formulating policies in New Delhi. Increasing food subsidies, stepping up allocations to the Public Distribution System (PDS), and raising the number of beneficiaries under the Antyodaya scheme are just some of the measures that should have been provided for in the Union Budget. But they were not.

Now the Department of Food and Public Distribution, under the leadership of Sharad Pawar, has taken this line of thinking forward with a set of proposals including reduction in wheat allocations to the states; allocation of coarse grains instead of wheat; removal of foodgrains from the Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana (SGRY) scheme as part of wage payments; decrease in allocations for drought-hit areas; increase in the prices of foodgrains for both Above Poverty Line (APL) and Below Poverty Line (BPL) cardholders in the PDS; reduction in quotas for both APL and BPL by 5 kg from the present 35 kg; and prevention of sale of wheat in the open market by State agencies, which is usually done to control prices. Taken together, these proposals constitute a frontal assault on the right to food.

The denial of the right to food for a large section of the Indian population reflected in increased malnourishment, stunted growth, ill-health and loss of energy and therefore productivity is an issue that deserves more national attention. If countries were to be graded in terms of provision of food security to their citizens, India would rank along with Ethiopia at the lower end. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) report that one out of every two children in India is malnourished confirms the lopsided priorities of successive governments at the centre that seek to narrow fiscal deficits by reducing food subsidies. The previous National Democratic Alliance (NDA) regime was symbolised by 6 crore tonnes of foodgrains rotting in Food Corporation of India (FCI) godowns while people went hungry. The United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government's record over the last year has been one of gross food mismanagement symbolised by plummeting wheat stocks, spiralling prices and, finally, wheat imports. A slew of policies, followed by first the NDA and now the UPA, have resulted in the present state of food insecurity at a time of acute rural distress. These policies include (1) the nature of public distribution; (2) the gradual decline in the role of the government and state agencies with

regard to procurement; (3) the lack of commitment to food self-sufficiency expressed in policies that encourage a switchover to export-oriented cash crop production from foodgrains; (4) encouragement of forward trading in foodgrains and pro-trader changes in the Agricultural Produce Marketing Act.

Targeted PDS

Until 1996, India had a universal PDS. The United Front government introduced the targeted system with the mistaken notion that the infirmities of the PDS would be curbed and that it would enable subsidised grain to reach those who actually needed it. Targeting entails an identification of the poor. Where these numbers are small, targeting may be a simple task. Where these numbers are large, and in countries such as India where the majority of the people are in the unorganised sector with fluctuating incomes, targeting could become an instrument to exclude sections of the poor from the right to food. Targeting is also a method linked to neoliberal policies that seek to limit, if not eliminate, the role of the government and State from its welfare responsibilities, which include the provision of accessible food to its people. India now has 10 years of experience of the targeted (into APL and BPL households with access to foodgrains at different prices) and further targeted (into BPL and Antyodaya households) system. Last year, the Planning Commission did an evaluation of the PDS and found that 57% of the poor had been actually excluded from the BPL system. Earlier, the Abhijit Sen Committee had also come up with similar findings, pointing to the utter failure of the targeted system, and suggested a return to the universal PDS.

An associated problem with targeting is that of identification of the poor. If only those who are officially identified as 'poor' can have access to food, then clearly the method has to be one that ensures accuracy. The prevailing method of identification is entirely unsatisfactory. There are two sets of estimates. The estimate that is linked to allocations of foodgrain is made by the Planning Commission. According to a reply given in parliament, the present concept of the poverty Line is based on the per capita consumption expenditure needed to attain a minimum amount of calorie intake out of food consumption along with a minimum amount of non-food expenditure in order to meet the requirements of clothing, shelter and transport, among other things. This is based on the methodology suggested by the Lakdawala Committee in 1993 and the population projections of the Registrar-General of India

as of March 1, 2000. Shockingly, according to the current assessments, it works out to around Rs 11 an adult a day. Clearly, this is not a poverty line but a destitution line.

Earlier, foodgrain allocations were not linked to poverty line assessments but were open-ended depending on past utilisation by the states. The linkages came along with the targeted system. This creates another anomaly. The Rural Development Ministry has a set of programmes for BPL families. The states have to conduct a BPL survey on the basis of the criteria decided by this ministry. These are different from those of the Planning Commission. Thus the state BPL census on the basis of one set of calculations may be entirely at variance with that of the Planning Commission. The number of BPL cards issued by the states is reportedly over and above the Planning Commission 'quotas' by as much as 2 crore. However, the food allocation is made not on the poverty estimates of the states but by those arbitrarily decided by the Planning Commission.

According to current estimates, 6 crore households in India come under the BPL category. That such a large number of people are earning less than Rs 330 a month is shocking enough. But what is cruel is that anyone earning above this meagre monthly income is classified as APL and excluded from the right to subsidised foodgrains. The very words 'Above Poverty Line' is misleading because they include a vast section of the poor who have been denied their entitlements through statistical fraud and jugglery to serve a neoliberal agenda.

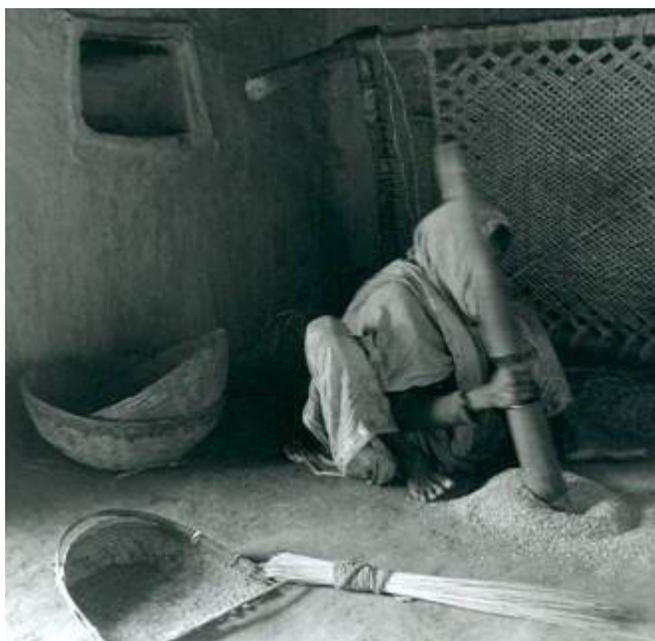
The need for subsidised foodgrains for a wider section of people is also reflected in increased offtake. While the offtake in the Antyodaya system is around 90%, showing the desperate need of people for cheap foodgrains, the offtake for BPL has doubled in the past few years, from 73.67 lakh tonnes to 228.45 lakh tonnes in 2005-06 out of an allocation of 273.20 lakh tonnes which constitutes 83% of the allocation. As far as APL is concerned, the offtake is much lower not

because people do not need the grain but because for several years there was not much difference in the APL price and the market price. The central issue price for wheat is Rs 7.50 a kg. For rice the price range is from Rs 10 in Gujarat and Maharashtra for a kg to Rs 9 in Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal. As current market prices of foodgrains have shot up, the demand for APL foodgrains will definitely increase but the poor offtake of the grain in the past few years is being cited by the government to cut allocations, precisely when people require it more. To illustrate, according to a memorandum by the Fair Price Dealers Association in West Bengal, whereas in 2004-05 the wheat allotment for both APL and BPL was 2.22 lakh tonnes, it has been slashed to 1.51 lakh tonnes in the current year. Godowns of the FCI in five major centres do not have wheat stocks at all. In April 2006, whereas the dispatch instructions were for 59 rakes, only 15 rakes actually arrived. Similarly, in the SGRY the earlier component of 5 kg of wheat as part payment of a daily wage has already been cut to 3 kg. States have complained that wheat allotments have virtually stopped for this programme.

Since rice procurement is reportedly up by around 28 lakh tonnes, it is possible for the central government to replace wheat allocations with rice at least for the time being in consultation with the states. Instead of taking such a step, the Centre is proposing a cut in allocations. Poverty assessment

The demand for a revision of methodologies for poverty assessment has been raised by several eminent economists and also in parliament. This is an issue that requires the most urgent attention. In any case, linking food allocations with centrally pre-decided quotas regardless of the reality on the ground is a method to reduce the share of the poor in national resources. This should be stopped and states allowed to draw food allocations according to their needs.

Secondly, the neglect of foodgrain production consequent to the new agricultural policy's emphasis on export-oriented cash crops is a major reason for current shortfalls in wheat production. With stagnating wheat production, the danger level in weakening food self-sufficiency has already been crossed with the rate of growth of food production falling below the rate of growth of population. Last year, the production of wheat reached a low of around 68.5 million tonnes while this year it is estimated at around 71 million tonnes. Soil exhaustion in India's wheat-producing states of Punjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh may require diversification but it will be disastrous if the government continues to encourage diversification without a policy of bringing alternative land under wheat production. Procurement policy The third issue is that of procurement of wheat. Wheat deficits to the extent of 20 lakh tonnes below the buffer stock norms leading to imports for the first time in decades are a result of the deliberate policy of the government to cut down procurement on the one hand and encourage private trade on the other. In 2001-02, with wheat production at 69.8 million tonnes, procurement by state agencies was 20.6 lakh tonnes. This year, with wheat production estimated at 71.5 million tonnes, procurement has plummeted to just 9.18 million tonnes. The minister's



explanation is that since farmers benefited from higher prices this was not a matter for concern. In fact, state agencies were disabled by pro-trader changes made in the Agricultural Produce Act. They could now go straight to the farmer in the remotest village, while the FCI can only buy from registered markets; the private traders no longer need a licence or a recognised agent to buy foodgrains, thus escaping from market fees which the FCI has to pay, adding to its costs; while private traders can go into the market according to their own assessments, the FCI is hamstrung by bureaucratic procedures. Thus big companies such as Cargill, Reliance, ITC and even the Australian Wheat Board, which has turned out to be the company supplying the imported wheat, went into villages in Punjab and Haryana much before state agencies and offered small farmers a price slightly higher than the official minimum support price (MSP) of Rs 650. Only when a large part of the produce had been cornered by private trade, the government offered a bonus of Rs 50.

Big farmers who could hold on to their stocks would have benefited from the higher prices offered later, but the bulk of the peasantry sold their produce to traders at prices below the Rs 700 offered three weeks too late by the government. If the FCI had been given the same leeway as private trade, then the present dismal record of low procurement could have been avoided. Shockingly, the government offered the Indian farmer almost Rs 100 less than what it paid foreign traders for wheat it has imported at Rs 789.20 a quintal. The cornering of the stock by private trade has permitted wheat hoarding, which has pushed market prices up by Rs 5-6 a kg. Thus private trade made a killing both ways, by buying the bulk of wheat at prices only slightly higher than the MSP and by manipulating market prices to two-thirds more than what they spent on buying the grain from farmers.

A dangerous argument advanced by the minister is that the import of wheat directly to the southern ports actually saved the exchequer Rs 399 crore. According to him, the cost of distribution of wheat procured in Punjab or Haryana to the last centre in southern India works out to Rs 1,120 a quintal compared to the Rs 997 it costs for the transport of imported wheat. Decades of building a food security system can be wiped out by such neoliberal ideologies that undermine the principle of self-reliance. Besides, it reflects a naive belief that international prices will remain static whereas clearly international traders are waiting to maximise profits through wheat imports at higher prices to India. Further, a dangerous concession by way of lowering of phytosanitary standards in the quality of wheat is also being planned. This must be opposed strongly. India can spend thousands of crores to protect itself through nuclear might but can render itself completely vulnerable by losing its greatest achievement, the backbone of sovereignty -- food self-sufficiency.

With this approach, the situation on the rice front could follow a similar disastrous pattern in the future. It also raises the question of whether it is appropriate to combine the Agriculture Ministry with the Food and Public Distribution Ministry, which has been done for the first time in the UPA

Cabinet with Sharad Pawar holding both portfolios. Fourthly, the FCI is being weakened systematically. Huge amounts, running into thousands of crores of rupees, are owed to the FCI on account of foodgrains supplied by it to different government programmes such as the SGRY and the food-for-work programme. But these amounts do not appear either in the Budget or in the accounts of the Rural Development Ministry.

In answer to a pointed question in parliament, the finance minister replied that there was no need to show it in the Budget as "there is a separate accounting system with the FCI". Precisely because the FCI's role in procurement and distribution of foodgrains is being curbed, the ability of the government to intervene in the market to control prices is also reduced. In a country where there is an uneven pattern of foodgrain production with a large number of states facing food deficit, weakening the FCI means weakening food security. Other programmes

The employment schemes of the government, which offer part of the payment in foodgrains, play an important part in the provision of food security, though inadequate. The move to cut back on this component will also cut down on the real wages of the worker. With the current high prices of wheat and other essential commodities, what the worker gains in cash is less than what he/she has to pay for his/her foodgrain needs in the market.

Linked to the issue of weakened distribution and the cutting down of allocations is the fate of the 4.83 lakh fair price shops. To use the illustration made by Madhura Swaminathan, there is evidence from Kerala, the state with the most effective system of rationing, of ration shops becoming unviable. In the early-1990s, the average monthly sale of cereals was 7,500 kg of rice and 2,000 kg of wheat per ration shop. By 2001, these figures had fallen to 1,400 kg of rice and 200 kg of wheat. Many fair price shops are now estimated to be making losses. According to an official estimate by the Government of Kerala, the gross earnings per fair price shop fell from Rs.3,711 before March 2000 to Rs.1,493 in August 2001. The situation has worsened since then.

What needs to be done is to improve the systems -- whether of the procurement agencies, the fair price shops or the methods of distribution -- but not to destroy them. But that is what the Food and Public Distribution Department seems to be proposing. People-centred reform requires a return to the universal PDS.

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The right to food

The Right to Food Campaign has succeeded in placing hunger at the centre of development discourse in India. The campaign hopes that this long-running case will culminate in the right to food becoming a fundamental right that can be made justiciable in any court of law in the country. The case and the accompanying campaign have established the importance of the law as facilitator, but the right to food also requires political means and people's participation

BIRAJ PATNAIK

In recent years, the battle against hunger has been placed at the centre of the development discourse in India. This has come about mainly due to the efforts of the Right to Food Campaign and as a direct result of a writ petition filed in the Supreme Court of India.

The petition was filed by the People's Union for Civil Liberties in April 2001 to seek legal enforcement of the right to food. This case, popularly known as the Right to Food Case, has since become a rallying point for trade unions, activists, grassroots organisations and NGOs to make the right to food a justiciable right. While the Indian Constitution does not explicitly mention the right to food as a fundamental right, it is implicitly enshrined in Article 21 of the Constitution as the fundamental right to life of every Indian citizen. Article 47 of the Constitution (in the Directive Principles of State Policy) is unambiguous: "The State shall regard the raising of the level of nutrition and the standard of living of its people and the improvement of public health as among its primary duties..."

The Indian judiciary, especially the Supreme Court, has on many occasions reaffirmed that the "right to life enshrined in Article 21 means something more than animal instinct and includes the right to live with dignity; it would include all these aspects which make life meaningful, complete and living" (Maneka Gandhi vs Union of India AIR 1978 SC 597). Other statutory constitutional institutions like the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) have also stated: "There is a fundamental right to be free from hunger" (January 17, 2003).

Despite this, India continues to be the site of the most unconscionable levels of chronic hunger and deprivation. Child malnutrition levels in India (46%; height for age data) have consistently been higher than those of even Sub-Saharan Africa and of countries with lower rates of economic growth like neighbouring Bangladesh (45%). The National Nutrition Monitoring Bureau (conducted by the National Institute of Nutrition, Indian Council for Medical Research) estimates that nearly 40% of the adult population in India has a Body Mass Index of less than 18.5, which implies chronic energy deficiency of epic proportions, bordering on a national humanitarian crisis.

It is in this context that Indian planners have, over the post-independence decades, put in place some of the biggest food security programmes in the world. The schemes can be broadly divided into four categories:

- Entitlement feeding (Integrated Child Development Services

[ICDS], Mid-Day Meal Scheme [MDMS])

- Food subsidy programmes (targeted Public Distribution System [PDS] including Antyodaya and Annapurna Yojana)
- Employment programmes (National Rural Employment Guarantee Act [NREGA], Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana, National Food for Work Programme, Rashtriya Sam Vikas Yojana)
- Social security programmes (National Maternity Benefit Scheme, National Old Age Pension Scheme and National Family Benefit Scheme).

These are comprehensive programmes that address the nutritional needs of a person from the time of birth through to old age. The ICDS seeks to take care of the nutritional challenges faced by infants and young children (0-6 years) and pregnant women, nursing mothers and adolescent girls; the MDMS provides meals to all primary school children; the targeted PDS provides subsidised grain to families below the poverty line; the NREGA provides 100 days of employment in 200 districts (to begin with); the social assistance programmes cover the aged who are left out of the social security net.

For decades, these programmes have succeeded in preventing the kind of large-scale famines that occurred in the years before independence (such as the Bengal famine of 1943). Yet they have been unable to substantively address the problem of chronic hunger. This is not only because of gaps in implementation, but also because, as many activists argue, they do not provide for sustainable and lasting livelihood options. The problem is compounded by the fact that concerted efforts have been lacking, except in a few states like West Bengal, to undertake land reforms, give communities rights over natural resources, and address the structural causes of poverty. Caste and gender discrimination have also been major contributing factors.

On the contrary, the last two decades have witnessed an unprecedented alienation of indigenous people and other marginalised communities from their land and other natural resources; displacement due to industrial projects and large dams in rural areas; and fundamental changes in the nature of poverty with unbridled urbanisation and the disenfranchisement of large sections of urban populations. Global pressures on the Indian economy and the pursuit of deflationary, neo-liberal policies by successive governments from the early-1990s have abetted in this pauperisation of millions of Indians.

The importance of the Right to Food Case has to be viewed in this macro-context. Therefore interventions by the Supreme Court through interim orders in this case become critical. The Right to Food Case is perhaps the longest continuing mandamus in the world on this issue. It is also one of the largest and most complex litigations involving a wide range of state and civil society actors in India. More than 400 affidavits have been filed so far; over 60 interim applications have been submitted and 47 interim orders have been passed by the SC in this case over the last five years.

The Supreme Court and the right to food

In an interim order on November 28, 2001, the Supreme Court converted most food and employment-related schemes into "legal entitlements". This also implies that the Government of India and state governments cannot change these schemes without the permission of the SC till the final judgment is passed in this case. The campaign hopes that this case will culminate in the right to food becoming a fundamental right that can be made justiciable in any court of law in the country.

The interim orders of the SC reflect the growing complexity of the case and the diverse issues being covered. The orders on universalising access to food, especially for children related to mid-day meals and the ICDS have been landmarks. On November 28, 2001, the Supreme Court directed state and central governments to universalise the mid-day meals and provide hot, cooked meals to all primary school children in India. The interim order also universalised the ICDS programme, making it mandatory for government to provide supplementary nutrition and the other five services under the ICDS to all children below the age of six, all pregnant women and nursing mothers and adolescent girls.

The NREGA emerged out of a separate process of political mobilisation involving a wider range of people outside the Right to Food Campaign, but the environment created by the Right to Food Case facilitated the emergence of the NREGA. Detailed orders have been passed from time to time on some of the schemes, but the PDS has not yet been universalised, nor have many other schemes that come within the purview of this case.

The order on the ICDS illustrates the nature of the interim orders. This order explicitly stated that: "We direct the State Governments/Union territories to implement the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) in full and to ensure that every ICDS disbursement centre in the country shall provide as under:

- a. Each child up to 6 years of age to get 300 calories and 8-10 grams of protein
- b. Each adolescent girl to get 500 calories and 20-25 grams of protein
- c. Each pregnant woman and each nursing mother to get 500 calories and 20-25 grams of protein
- d. Each malnourished child to get 600 calories and 16-20 grams of protein
- e. Have a disbursement centre in every settlement. "

When the state and central governments did not comply, the SC was compelled to pass further orders on October 7, 2004, directing the Government of India to increase the number of ICDS centres to cover 14 lakh habitations. This would mean starting at least 7 lakh additional centres as a minimum requirement to universalise the ICDS. The same order recommended the increase of the allocation of "rupees one per child per day" to "rupees two per child per day", with the central and state governments contributing one rupee each.

The same interim order also directed the government to make "earnest effort to cover the slums under ICDS" and ensure that all SC/ST habitations got an anganwadi "as early as possible". The SC also categorically banned the use of contractors for providing supplementary nutrition and directed the Government of India and all states and union territories to use local women's self-help groups and mahila mandals to supply the supplementary food distributed in anganwadi centres.

Similar detailed interim orders have been passed for virtually every scheme that falls in the ambit of the case. The scope of judicial intervention on the right to food has thus been considerably enhanced through the interventions of the Supreme Court.

Simultaneously, the campaigners and individual citizens have



started approaching High Courts across the country on matters related to the right to food and the lack of compliance by state governments with the interim orders of the SC. Having secured significant policy changes at the national level, the focus has moved to legal interventions on implementation.

In an interim order of October 29, 2002, the SC had directed that the “Chief Secretaries” of the concerned states would be held responsible for any persistent default in compliance with orders. This had led to some ambiguity, with the Delhi and Rajasthan High Courts refusing to entertain petitions pertaining to violations at the state level since the SC was monitoring the schemes. In another order, the SC invoked the procedure of the DK Basu protocol for the right to food and stated that:

"Failure to comply with the requirements herein above mentioned shall apart from rendering the official concerned liable for departmental action also render him liable to be punished for contempt of court and the proceedings for contempt of court may be instituted in any High Court of the country having territorial jurisdiction over the matter."

The status of the interim orders

In an interim order of May 8, 2002, the SC also put in place an independent mechanism the Commissioners of the Supreme Court to ensure compliance by the state and central government with the orders of the court. This is not the first time the SC has put in place such a mechanism, but it is the first instance in the context of the right to food.

The Commissioners submit bi-annual reports to the SC. Six reports highlighting non-compliance, structural issues regarding hunger, and the hurdles in implementation have been submitted to the SC so far. The SC then asks the state and central governments to respond to the issues raised by the Commissioners.

The Commissioners are also empowered to move contempt of court charges against chief secretaries and other senior state/ central government officials when the non-compliance is wilful and deliberate. The Commissioners have appointed Joint Commissions of Enquiry (JCEs) with representatives nominated both by the Commissioners and the government, to enquire into charges of malfeasance by government officials in food schemes. JCEs have been commissioned in Chhattisgarh, Assam, West Bengal and Madhya Pradesh. These enquiries have led to the dismissal of a few officials, departmental enquiries against some, and suspension from service for others. They have also led to grievances about the implementation of food schemes being addressed.

The Commissioners operate through a network of honorary state and national advisers to monitor the progress of the food schemes, suggest reforms in the laws, policies and programmes pertaining to the Right to Food, and, wherever necessary, get directions from the SC and have action taken against erring state/ central government officials.

In the five years since the Right to Food Case was admitted in the Supreme Court, many milestones have been achieved, but

the journey ahead is much longer than the path traversed so far. For example, the interim orders have resulted in the Government of India sanctioning 1.88 lakh additional ICDS centres so far, with a sanction of another lakh expected soon.

At the macro level the budget of the ICDS has gone up nearly three times from Rs 1,500 crore in 2003-04 to almost Rs 4,000 crore for 2006-07. Many state governments have been galvanised into action and the ICDS has been the focus of discussions for the National Advisory Committee of the UPA government. The interim orders on the ICDS have also brought together many sections of civil society. The Hyderabad convention on the Children's Right to Food and subsequent action by local groups reflect some of the newer forms of mobilisation on this issue.

But these significant changes in the ICDS are inadequate when compared to what needs to be done to make the services universal. The Government of India took almost three years to act on the interim orders. Consequently, very few of the 1.88 lakh new anganwadi centres have become operational in the states. Even when the government did act, it chose to contest the figure for making the programme universal. It has still not agreed, as its correspondence with the Commissioners of January 23, 2006 shows, to a minimum of 14 lakh anganwadi centres. After an intervention by the Commissioners, the matter is now sub-judice in the SC.

Most state governments continue to retain contractors and have not decentralised the provision of supplementary nutrition to women's self-help groups despite the unambiguous orders. The battle against the contractor lobby is likely to continue for some time even as they innovate ways to retain their interests in the ICDS. The Commissioners have pointed out in a note to the SC, discussed at the July 17 hearing at the SC, that the new norms proposed by the Government of India in fact go against the principle of decentralisation.

Despite the odds, the Commissioners office and the legal team have got the overwhelming support of civil society organisations. This support adds strength to their intervention and it is special because working on the details of government programmes has not been a significant area of work for many of these organisations.

Compliance with SC orders has been strongest where local mobilisation has been successful. This has reaffirmed the limited role that legal action on its own can play in securing rights. It has also re-established the strength of mobilising people to assert their rights. The right to food is a political issue that can be resolved only through political means and will not lend itself only to a legal solution. However, this case has also established the ways in which the law can be a facilitator and a catalyst. This, amongst others, may be one of the lasting contributions that the Right to Food Campaign in India will make to the rights discourse in India.

Biraj Patnaik is the Principal Adviser to the Commissioners of the Supreme Court. The views expressed in this article are his own and do not reflect the formal position of the Office of the Commissioners or the Right to Food Campaign.

'The RTF Campaign has outgrown the court case'

Legal action is an integral part of democratic politics, and the Right to Food Campaign is about supplementing legal action with other forms of public action, says development economist Jean Dreze

BIRAJ PATNAIK

Jean Dreze is one of the leading development economists in the world. He has made seminal contributions to the discourse on hunger and public action and has co-authored many books with Nobel laureate Prof Amartya Sen. He is an Honorary Professor at the Delhi School of Economics and the Govind Ballabh Pant Social Sciences Institute. Dreze is an Indian citizen of Belgian origin. He has travelled extensively across India over the past three decades and is associated with many campaigns. He is one of the leading figures in the Right to Information movement and was a member of the support group that initiated the Right to Food Campaign. He is widely acknowledged as an architect of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. He was also a member of the National Advisory Committee of the UPA government.



It is now the fifth year of the Right to Food Campaign. What would you count as the most significant achievements of the campaign?

I am not sure what counts as an "achievement of the campaign". On almost every important issue, the campaign has been part of a larger process of democratic practice. For instance, is the Employment Guarantee Act an achievement of the campaign? Well, the campaign certainly played a major role in putting this issue on the political agenda, as well as in drafting the Act. But many other actors also played a crucial role: the Left parties, the National Advisory Council, the trade unions, and so on. There is no point in trying to apportion the credit. Having said this, I think that major issues on which the campaign made a useful contribution include employment guarantee, mid-day meals, social security, and more recently, the universalisation of nutrition and health services for children under the age of six.

While the right to food has been an important area of work for decades for many trade unions, activists and civil society organisations, the present RTF campaign has its roots in the PUCL petition in the Supreme Court. Do you think that the campaign has now grown beyond the issues that are being raised and debated in the SC and become more rooted in local action?

I think that the campaign has certainly outgrown the court

case. Of course, the Supreme Court orders did give the campaign a much-needed tool for action on many issues. For instance, I doubt that mid-day meals would ever have been introduced in primary schools without the intervention of the Court. But there have also been important achievements on issues that go beyond the court case. The most obvious example is the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. This has been a major focus of the campaign for the last two years, even though it has little to do with the court case.

Many activists believe that the right to food is a political problem that will lend itself to a political solution and that the law may not be enough to secure the right. This can also be derived from your work on famines with Prof Sen, which reasserts the importance of local action in securing rights. Are you satisfied with civil society's level of engagement outside the legal framework?

Firstly, I think that this contrast between politics and the law is a little misleading. The legal system is one of the democratic institutions that can be used to assert the right to food, or for that matter other economic and social rights. There are others: electoral politics, public debate, media advocacy, street action, and more. So I see legal action as an integral part of democratic politics. As far as civil society's "level of engagement outside the legal framework" is concerned, I am not sure what the relevant yardstick is. But I certainly feel that we are making poor use of this country's vast opportunities for effective social action.

Many people argue that the focus on schemes and legal action does not adequately address structural issues of poverty like land reforms and forest rights and underplays caste and gender dynamics, which are the root causes of persistent hunger. How would you react to that?

Legal action does not exclude "structural issues" as you call them. Land reforms and forest rights, for example, certainly have important legal dimensions. What is true is that legal action has its limits. In fact, I am quite disillusioned myself with the legal system. The Supreme Court of India has become an unaccountable centre of power, which brazenly uses its authority to "legislate at random in all directions", as Kropotkin described the lawyers of his time. But while it is important to be aware of the limits of legal action, shunning it altogether would be a mistake. What is important is to supplement legal

action with other forms of public action. That is what the campaign is all about.

The Right to Food Campaign, especially for grassroots activism, has extensively used the Right to Information Act. You have been actively involved in the protests against the proposed dilution of the RTI through the amendments on file notings. Do you think that the issue has been satisfactorily resolved?

This issue is anything but resolved, since the proposed amendments have not been withdrawn. Their introduction in parliament has merely been postponed. Incidentally, the amendments are not just about file notings. What is at issue is a series of dilutions of the Act, which threaten to undermine the Right to Information altogether.

You have made significant contributions to a number of national campaigns. But the interface between various campaigns and groups is decreasing. Has the RTF campaign been able to create a more inclusive platform? How can the campaign draw in more networks and groups?

I have not noticed any decreasing interface. In this kind of broad-based, informal movement, the patterns of association between different groups are bound to change over time. Perhaps some of these bonds are weakening, but I am sure that others are getting stronger. For instance, strong links are emerging between organisations working on the right to information and the right to work, and similarly between activists concerned with the right to food and the right to work. As for creating inclusive platforms that work, I think that this is the holy grail of social action in India, or for that matter anywhere. The search continues.

One of your strengths has been your ability to mobilise young people to volunteer for campaigns you have been associated with. Would you agree with the perception that there is a decline in the number of young people willing to participate in political action, especially on an issue like the right to food which affects some of the poorest sections of Indian society?

I don't know if such a decline is taking place. But if it is, the main reason is that we fail to present young people with opportunities to participate in effective forms of political action on these issues. In my experience, there is a vast reservoir of latent energy, imagination and commitment among young people, waiting to be tapped. For instance, you would be surprised to see how many students are willing to take part in field surveys during the summer months, without remuneration, even in very difficult conditions just to make a difference. This experience often has a lasting influence on their values and priorities. But how often do they get a chance to do something like this?

A powerful guarantee

If effectively implemented, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act will go a long way towards ensuring food security and protecting rural households from hunger

TANUSHREE SOOD

Work is not just about earning a wage. It brings with it a way of living, a sense of security and dignity. The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), which was passed by parliament on August 24, 2005, is an important step towards the realisation of the right to work in India.

The Act reinforces the duty of the State to provide employment to its citizens. The NREGA's legal guarantee of 100 days of work at the state minimum wage promises substantial relief to rural households. The Act will go a long way towards ensuring food security and protecting rural households from hunger.

India has a history of employment-generation schemes starting from famine relief works, the Jawahar Rozgar Yojana, the Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana and more recently the National Food for Work Programme. But these schemes were largely left to the discretion of the administrative machinery.

With the NREGA, work becomes a right. Such a guarantee of employment would, to some extent, act as a shield for the rural poor and the landless, saving them from the exploitative rich agricultural class.

The NREGA and food security are significantly interlinked. The Act will give a necessary push to the purchasing power of the rural poor. An additional income of approximately Rs 6,000 a year for each participating household is estimated to be sufficient to pull a large section of families above the poverty line.

Women usually are a major proportion of the workforce employed at NREGA work sites. The Act will provide some economic independence to women. Dungarpur district in Rajasthan is an example. Estimates suggest that about 90% of the 1.60 lakh workers employed in April 2006 in this area were women. Reports from other states also show high rates of participation of women at the work sites. Various workers' organisations are asking for part payment of wages in kind. With such an amendment, the link between the Act and food security will be enhanced.

In rural areas, the poor are often compelled to work under hazardous conditions of drudgery and physical strain. The NREGA includes an element of basic facilities and dignity. Payment of wages within 15 days after completion of work, provision of drinking water and shaded areas at worksites are small steps to make the work less tiring. The demand for functional crèches at the work sites is also becoming stronger.

The Act is likely to make a dent in migration. Migration for work, both within and between states, is common in the countryside and the cities. When work is made available in the villages, many rural families are likely to stay back instead of going to the cities in the slack season. Noted activist Aruna Roy spoke about this aspect at a recent social audit in Dungarpur district.

Another impact of the Act is a possible increase in the bargaining power of migrant labourers in states like Gujarat and Maharashtra. With the option of going back home, the workers will be able to ask for higher wages. However, migration will decrease only if work opportunities under the NREGA are relatively predictable as they would be if the principle of 'demand-driven employment' actually works. Only if the workers are confident that work will be available, are they likely to reconsider migration.

The Act gives power and responsibility to the panchayat institutions. The gram sabha and the gram panchayat are two key implementing agencies in the Act. The Act authorises the gram sabha to recommend works to be taken up, to monitor and supervise these works, and to conduct social audits of the implementation. The panchayats are responsible for planning the works, executing 50% of the works, registering households and issuing job cards.

The NREGA is not just about creating employment, but also about developing the social infrastructure. The assets created under the Act will be a step towards growth through higher investment in rural infrastructure. The potential for labour-intensive public works in the field of environmental protection is massive; this includes areas such as watershed development, land regeneration, prevention of soil erosion, restoration of tanks, protection of forests and related activities.

Expenditure on the NREGA's schemes will yield dividends not only in terms of economic activity in the present but also by improving the conditions of production in rural areas in the future. Needless to say, the implementation of the NREGA is critical. A strategy of spreading awareness and continuous pressure by workers' organisations, community-based organisations and NGOs, is important. The NREGA will then be an effective instrument for reducing poverty and achieving food security.

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Insecure in the gathering dusk

Being old and poor in India often means being hungry and helpless. The decade-old National Old Age Pension Scheme is a buffer for this section of the population, but it is not universal and leaves out many vulnerable people

VANDANA BHATIA

If a person has spent her or his life struggling as a daily wager or agricultural labourer earning subsistence wages, food security in old age remains a distant dream. The elderly are left even more insecure when their children migrate for their own survival. Many old people live alone in villages, fighting a daily battle, sometimes living off the generosity of other villagers who are also poor, at times begging.

For decades, the Indian State overlooked this vulnerable section of the population. In a national broadcast on July 28, 1995 the then Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao announced that the National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP) would come into effect from August 15, 1995. The NSAP includes the National Old Age Pension Scheme (NOAPS) and the National Family Benefit Scheme (NFBS).

Both are implemented along with the Annapurna scheme. The NOAPS and Annapurna are schemes for the aged poor; Annapurna gives 19 kilos of free grain to old people left out of the pension cover. The NFBS gives immediate relief in the form of a one-time cash payment of Rs 10,000 in case of the death of the breadwinner in the family.

The NSAP started as a centrally sponsored programme that gave assistance to the state governments to provide benefits according to the central government's guidelines. In 2002-03 the NSAP and Annapurna were transferred to the state governments and given the status of a state scheme with financial assistance from the central government. The states are now required to have a mandatory minimum provision for these schemes in their budgets. So far, this arrangement has not worked and many states completely rely on the central government for funds.

The Annapurna scheme has been withdrawn in states like Madhya Pradesh and Haryana. The NFBS is in dire straits; its coverage was only 35.8% of the target in 2004-05. Many of the stumbling blocks are common across the three schemes--- limited targets, limited allocations and no guidelines for implementation.

The National Old Age Pension Scheme is a direct transfer of income to the aged poor. People above 65 years of age and below the poverty line are entitled to a monthly pension. In some states like Delhi, the age criterion has been revised to 60 years. The Ministry of Rural Development uses a set of calculations to determine the poorer among the poor and arrive at the number of people eligible for pensions.

The financial assistance under the NOAPS till 2005-06 was Rs 75 per person per month. Some states such as Delhi, Maharashtra and Sikkim make a significant additional contribution to this amount but as many as 18 states and union territories have been paying Rs 100 or less per month. For the poor and destitute, Rs 100 per month can only be an inadequate amount.

In the budget for 2006-07, the central government has raised its contribution from Rs 75 per month per pensioner to Rs 200. This is welcome but it should not legitimise a cutback in state contributions. Besides, central government employees and pensioners get an increment twice a year that is pegged to the consumer price index. The NOAPS should similarly be reviewed every six months. Because nutritional vulnerability and the threat of starvation and death are more imminent in old age for the poor, the government must universalise pension benefits.

In December 2005, the Commissioners to the Supreme Court (in the context of Right to Food case) raised a number of issues such as coverage, verification of existing beneficiaries, the identification of new beneficiaries and the distribution process.

The actual coverage does not even meet the limited targets set by the government. The Commissioners report said that against a target of 58.09 lakh beneficiaries for 22 states for which the data was available, the potential coverage based on the utilisation figures was only 51.92 lakh in 2004-05. This was the combined coverage under the NOAPS and state pension schemes (wherever applicable).

The guidelines state "Village panchayats and relevant municipalities shall report every case of the death of a pensioner immediately after its occurrence to the appropriate sanctioning authority. The sanctioning authority shall ensure that payments are stopped thereafter." In practice the verification procedure is inadequate. The lists are often not updated and continue to include the names of people who have passed away. This leads to either pilferage or unutilised funds and a denial of benefits to other deserving elderly people.

The lack of verification has hamstrung the scheme. According to a report on August 27, 2005 in The Times of India, a door-to-door survey was conducted in Delhi in February 2005 for the first time to ascertain what happens to the Rs 350 a month given to 1,56,131 senior citizens. It found that 27,000 'beneficiaries' were untraceable and 10,131 were dead. The report said, "The Social Welfare Department of the Delhi

government has been paying old age pensions to 10,131 dead persons and about Rs 5-6 crore of the taxpayers' money is lying unused locked in bank accounts and post offices." In Delhi, the pension is credited to the bank accounts of the beneficiaries on a quarterly basis.

On July 8, 2005, The Telegraph newspaper similarly said, "The Nagaland government is facing a major problem weeding out dead pensioners." It said that in some places grandchildren were withdrawing the money while in other places people totally unrelated to the pensioners were using the money.

In many states, the disbursement procedure is problematic. For example, in Gaya district in Bihar, old people are expected to come to the block office to receive the money on the day the pension is distributed. Many people miss the advance information about the date and often the block office is far away from the village at times even 10 kilometres away. Two elderly people in Bodh Gaya collapsed as they struggled on their way to the block office in the sweltering heat of June 2005. The block officer later testified this in the presence of the District Collector.

After more than a decade, the NOAPS is still not fully

functional. Effective implementation requires awareness among citizens of their entitlement. The scheme also needs a multidimensional overhaul with an enhanced budget, better utilisation, clearer guidelines and a non-negotiable commitment from the government to provide social assistance to all people in the dusk of their lives.

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Disintegrated services

There are large gaps between the intentions and implementation of the ICDS, the only government programme aimed at providing nutrition, health and education-related services to children, adolescent girls and mothers

NANDINI NAYAK

The ICDS (Integrated Child Development Services) is aimed at providing nutrition, health and education-related services to 0-6-year-old children, pregnant women, nursing mothers and adolescent girls. It was started as a small pilot project in 1975. At that time, the high incidence of mortality, morbidity and malnutrition among children was recognised as a matter of concern. It was acknowledged that the first four plan periods had neglected the health, nutrition and education needs of the ICDS target groups.

Thirty years later, the ICDS remains the only government programme of its kind in India. It continues to be critically important, not only because the 'target population' has a right to the services under the ICDS, but also because the health and nutrition of these target groups in India is in a dire state and in need of urgent attention.

As many as 47% of India's children are undernourished and about a third are born with low birth weight, according to the Human Development Report 2005. The ICDS is the only public programme intended to address this situation. The National Policy for Children (1974), in consonance with which the ICDS was started, says, "Programmes shall be implemented to provide nutrition services with the object of removing deficiencies in the diet of children." It also says, "Programmes will be undertaken for the general improvement of the health and for the care, nutrition and nutrition education of expectant and nursing mothers." The Tenth Five Year Plan says, "The ICDS is envisaged to provide supplementary feeding to bridge the nutritional gaps that exist in respect of children below six years and expectant and nursing mothers. Despite this clear mandate, the ICDS has been implemented only in isolated pockets, mainly in areas with some political mobilisation. In large parts of the country the potential of the ICDS remains untapped.

Attention was sharply drawn to the ICDS in November 2001 when the Supreme Court directed the central and state governments to provide all its beneficiaries with the services promised under the ICDS (order dated November 28, 2001, in Civil Writ Petition 196/2001, People's Union for Civil Liberties v. Union of India and others).

The National Plan of Action for Children (NPAC), 2005 of the Government of India, speaks of "universalisation of ICDS as per Supreme Court orders" as a strategy for achieving the nutrition-related goals including the "elimination of child malnutrition as a national priority". Four years after the SC order, however, the

Supplementary Nutrition Programme (SNP) component of the six ICDS services reaches a mere 25% of 0-6-year-old children, 20% of pregnant women and nursing mothers, and 0.3% of adolescent girls (N C Saxena and Harsh Mander, Sixth Report of the Commissioners of the Supreme Court in PUCL v UOI and others, CWP 196/2001).

Volumes can be written about the implementation of the ICDS. Some of the more serious problems are low financial allocations by both the central and state governments and poor coordination between government departments responsible for implementing the ICDS. "Coordination of policy implementation among various departments to promote child development" was in fact one of the original objectives of the ICDS. This lack of political will has led to a magnified failure in attending to doubly vulnerable groups like disabled children and street children.

Monitoring the implementation of the ICDS involves several issues. The mismatch between policy statements and actual implementation in field projects is of a magnitude that is not recognised or acknowledged by policy makers. Only an effectively implemented community-based programme can hope to meet the nutritional requirements of the people targeted by the ICDS. The wide gap between policy intent and the reality of implementation must be bridged.

To illustrate the mismatch: A limit is set at the anganwadi centres to the number of beneficiaries of the SNP. Government policy says there is in fact no such limit. Despite clear Supreme Court orders to cover all the beneficiaries and statements in other documents like the NPAC, the financial allocations made by both state and central government for the SNP are limited. The number then gets limited to 100 persons at each anganwadi centre.

This is a matter of serious concern for several reasons. First, the limit on the number raises concerns about the selection of the beneficiaries. This is particularly pertinent in the context of social exclusion. As with all social schemes, ICDS benefits often get concentrated in the hands of a socially and economically affluent class, crowding out families and communities more vulnerable to hunger and malnutrition. This happens because anganwadi centres are often inaccessible to isolated hamlets, mostly of dalit communities. The SC's order to give priority to opening anganwadis at SC/ST hamlets and in urban slums is rarely implemented.

Second, this issue is particularly critical in terms of policy. In correspondence with the Commissioners appointed by the Supreme Court, the Government of India said that about 46% of the eligible beneficiaries access ICDS services. The central and state governments justify the low financial allocations for the SNP on the pretext that less than 50% of the eligible beneficiaries are interested in the service. The ground reality indicates that almost all eligible beneficiaries are interested, but many are denied the benefits.

When they are excluded because of questionable caps, many people feel dejected and think it is not worthwhile to spend time seeking the benefits of the SNP. Rather than a "lack of interest", many intended beneficiaries stay away because earning a livelihood, childcare and tending to their homes are primary concerns. During a visit to the Goilkera block in West Singhbhum district in Jharkhand, several families doing daily wage labour categorically told me that the amount of food given to them at the anganwadi centre is not worth losing a day of work. In many instances, when the women go to collect the food, they are told they are not "entitled" to it.

In the juggling of numbers, the imperative of tackling malnutrition takes a beating. For a population vulnerable to malnutrition, only token coverage under the supplementary nutrition programme is not likely to help. Policy statements must be translated into reality. In the absence of any real implementation, the well being of millions of India's young children, adolescent girls and mothers remains precarious.

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Women eat least, and last

Women are more vulnerable to malnutrition. But the targeted food programmes for women, including the National Maternity Benefit Scheme, focus only and inadequately -- on the reproductive function of women. Ensuring that women secure their right to food is not seen as a desirable goal in itself, even though women are nutritionally deprived at all other stages of their life

DIPA SINHA

Gender, apart from other economic, social and political factors, plays a major role in determining food security and nutritional status in India. Women tend to eat last and also the least in many families. It is often believed that boys/men require more food because they are physically more active. But women's needs are greater, especially during adolescence, pregnancy and breastfeeding.

The effects of gender discrimination are reflected in data. In India, 60% of women in their childbearing years are stunted as a result of inadequate nutrition during their own childhood. About 80% of pregnant women in the country suffer from iron-deficiency anaemia. The low nutritional status of women has an inter-generational effect as the birth weight of infants exhibits a pronounced relationship with the nutritional status of the mothers. A malnourished anaemic woman is more likely to deliver a baby with low birth weight. Such a baby will carry the handicap throughout its life, and so on. On the other hand, studies have shown that as the Body Mass Index of mothers increases, the mean birth weight of children also increases.

The central and state governments have several schemes that target specific groups of the population recognised as being more vulnerable, such as the poor, the aged and women. The schemes for women are the National Maternity Benefit Scheme (NMBS) and the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), which has a component of supplementary nutrition for pregnant women, lactating mothers and adolescent girls.

The National Maternity Benefit Scheme

The central government's National Maternity Benefit Scheme (NMBS), modified to become the Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY), was launched in the year 1995. It was part of the National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP) to be implemented by the Ministry of Rural Development and later transferred to the health ministry. Under the NMBS, pregnant women from BPL families were entitled to cash assistance of Rs 500 for up to two births, 8-12 weeks before delivery.

From the outset, this scheme has been characterised by low allocations, under-utilisation, long delays and procedural complications. When the NMBS was launched, the targeted number of annual beneficiaries was fixed at 57.5 lakh expectant women (based on the estimated population of expectant mothers giving birth to a first or second child). However, in the 10 years between 1995-96 and 2004-05 the number of annual beneficiaries has never exceeded 15.8 lakh (or 27.4% of the

target). Coverage under this scheme worsened after it was shifted to the Ministry of Health in 2001, with only 4.2 lakh (or 7.3% of the targeted number) receiving any benefit under this scheme in 2004-05.

The low coverage of beneficiaries is also reflected in the under-utilisation of funds over the years. According to the Sixth Report of the Commissioners to the Supreme Court in a case (Peoples' Union of Civil Liberties versus Union of India and Others) submitted to the court in December 2005, in the three years between 2001-02 and 2003-04, on average only 38% of the allocated funds were utilised by the state governments. The amount allocated under the scheme has been grossly inadequate. To cover the target of 57.5 lakh mothers with a cash assistance of Rs 500 each, Rs 287.5 crore are required each year (and Rs 1,437.5 crore for five years). However, the Government of India allocated a mere Rs 500 crore in the Tenth Plan period (2002-07), which is only 35% of the required amount.

The Sixth Report of the Commissioners identifies many reasons for the scheme's lack of performance. Some of these reasons are:

- (1) A change in the nodal agency from the Ministry of Rural Development to the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and the corresponding transition period in the states.
- (2) Changing objectives. A letter to all the state governments said, "The Government of India has now decided that the NMBS may be transferred (w.e.f. 1.4.2001) to the Department of Family Welfare to become part and parcel of the population stabilisation programme". No official guidelines were introduced, but the transfer of the scheme and talk of the NMBS being replaced by the JSY resulted in changes in its implementation at the state level.
- (3) The funds under the NMBS were directly transferred to the district level whereas the utilisation certificates were to be collected by the state nodal agencies, which led to a lot of confusion. A delay in the release of funds by the central government also resulted in the scheme's poor performance.
- (4) Another important reason is the lack of information and awareness about the scheme at the grassroots level in many states.
- (5) A lack of involvement of panchayat institutions and multiple criteria for selection despite an SC order on involvement of

village panchayats. Other institutions substituted or complemented the panchayat, such as the primary health centres, anganwadis (to certify pregnancy and the first two births) and block and revenue officials (to certify BPL status). This made it procedurally difficult for pregnant women to get the assistance.

(6) The other important reason for low participation is the low rate of financial assistance under NMBS. In 1995, Rs 300 was fixed as the cash entitlement. It was raised to Rs 500 in 1998. Not only is the amount too low, there has been no increase since 1998.

The Janani Suraksha Yojana

Based on reports that the NMBS did not have any impact on maternal mortality, the scheme was modified into the Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY) and launched in April 2005. The objectives of the JSY are reducing maternal and infant mortality through increased delivery at health institutions. The NMBS' focus was the provision of maternity benefits. The guidelines for the implementation of the JSY say, "While the NMBS is linked to provision of a better diet for pregnant women from BPL families, the JSY integrates the cash assistance with antenatal care during the pregnancy period, institutional care during delivery and immediate post-partum period in a health centre by establishing a system of coordinated care by field level health worker." The scheme links the cash assistance to ante-natal check-ups and an institutional delivery.

The initial guidelines did not retain the objective of ensuring food security, without any conditions, for all pregnant BPL women. This defeated the purpose of the original NMBS---to provide social security to pregnant women. Linking the benefits of the scheme to various conditions would severely undermine the rights of a woman to use the social assistance under the NMBS to access food, nutrition and rest during pregnancy and after, and also the rights of the child to breastfeed and get care. Calculations in the Sixth Report of the Commissioners showed that on an average nearly 65.5% of the eligible beneficiaries under NMBS would get zero direct cash assistance under the proposed JSY.

The Commissioners wrote to the Ministry of Health reminding them of the Supreme Court order of April 27, 2004. The order had said that no scheme covered by the orders of the SC shall be discontinued or restricted in any way without the prior approval of the Court and until further orders, the schemes would continue to operate and benefit all those who are covered by the schemes.

In response to the intervention by the Commissioners, the following modifications have now been made to the JSY:

1. Rs 500 will be paid under JSY to all pregnant eligible BPL women irrespective of place of delivery. It is not mandatory to have ante-natal check-ups.
2. In addition, women who have an institutional delivery will be paid Rs 200 in rural areas and Rs 100 in urban areas. Rs 1,500 will be given in case of delivery-related complication leading to

a caesarean. The BPL criterion has been removed for institutional deliveries.

3. In low-performing states, the age bar and number of births for which assistance is provided under the NMBS, have been removed.

Shortcomings of the scheme

The NMBS/JSY is especially important because it is the only attempt in India to introduce 'maternity benefits'. It has been ensured that the modified JSY does not dilute the provisions of NMBS, but shortcomings remain in the scheme. These will have an impact on the effectiveness of the NMBS/JSY as a scheme for ensuring maternity benefits or enhancing food security for pregnant women.

First, the problem of low allocations persists in spite of the JSY being part of the larger National Rural Health Mission. The Annual Report of the Ministry of Health (2005-06) says an allocation of Rs 100 crore was made for JSY under the RCH flexi-pool mechanism. Considering that the earlier NMBS itself would have required Rs 287.5 crore for full implementation, what would be required under JSY (with its additional benefits) would be much more. Such low allocations expose the government's lack of seriousness. It has been seen in many schemes that inadequate funds invariably lead to low utilisation.

Second, the amount of assistance per woman is so small that it is unlikely to really have any impact on the food and nutritional status of women. The Tamil Nadu government recently revised its maternity benefit scheme so that each pregnant woman would get a total benefit of Rs 6,000. The impact of this change must be studied and other state governments and the central government must revise the scheme accordingly.

Third, since this scheme is targeted only at BPL women, all the problems associated with the identification and definition of BPL families apply here as well. In this context, the Parliamentary Standing Committee's recommendation of an inbuilt mechanism for a periodic survey to verify the exact number of beneficiaries can be considered.

More importantly, the scheme does not in any way try to address the intra-family inequalities that make women more vulnerable to malnutrition. Surveys show that the cash assistance under the NMBS or the dry rations given by the ICDS go into the larger family 'pool' and get shared by all members of the family (with the pregnant woman probably getting the least). On the other hand, if there is greater social mobilisation in favour of the pregnant woman's right to food and nutrition, the cash assistance can go a long way in helping the woman get the extra bit she needs during pregnancy.

A larger issue that needs to be thought about is that all the targeted food programmes for women, including the NMBS/JSY, focus on women performing their reproductive function. The focus is on pregnant women or adolescent girls having healthier babies or on reducing infant mortality rates. Women securing their right to food is not seen as a desirable goal in itself, even though women are nutritionally deprived at all other stages of their life. The existing programmes fail to address gender inequalities in access to food and at best can be seen as a small beginning which could have potential if implemented along with other programmes that address gender discrimination.

The empty belly of Bhandup

Eleven chronically malnourished children from a slum in Mumbai were admitted to hospital in June. They like numerous others---are the victims of a toxic combination of poverty and a State machinery that compels millions in the financial capital of the country to live without water, sanitation, employment, healthcare or adequate food

ANOSH MALEKAR

Three-year-old Jyotsna Mayekar was sitting in a cradle. We were at Chamunda Nagar, a slum colony in east Bhandup. Naresh, her father, a very frail man, told us, “The doctor had said to keep her in hospital for two months. We did keep her for nearly 30 days. But we cannot afford it any more.”

Eleven children, including Jyotsna, all from Mumbai, the country's financial capital, made it to the headlines in June 2006 after being admitted to a municipal hospital by a non-governmental organisation. They were chronically malnourished.

Doctors at the Rajawadi hospital advised hospitalisation for Jyotsna till she recovered completely. She was diagnosed as a “grade four case” of malnutrition, underweight and unable to walk or talk. But Jyotsna's family could not afford the extended stay in hospital and brought the child back, hoping she would recover at home.

The walls of their home, made of tattered sackcloth, were stinking on a wet July afternoon. Piles of garbage and waterlogged pathways crisscrossed the unauthorised slum colony. Jyotsna could barely stand on her thin legs. Perhaps she preferred the comfort of the cradle meant for Ganesh, her three-month-old brother. Keeping her in the cradle was one way of keeping Jyotsna from crying for food, which was scarce in the household.

Naresh Mayekar was a manual scavenger; his 55-year-old father Lahu also worked as a scavenger. The two could earn up to Rs 60 on a good day. The residents of apartments in the vicinity haggled fiercely over the amount they would pay the two for cleaning their toilets. A really good day meant cleaning the sewage pipes of an entire housing colony. That was a lot of work but they could earn as much as Rs 100.

On days when there was no work, Naresh had to borrow small sums of money from the neighbours. “Today I borrowed Rs 20 to feed the children,” he said, pointing to the packet of biscuits that would supplement the rice and dal for his daughter and wife, who was still nursing their infant son.

The low quality rice and watery dal could hardly provide Jyotsna the high quality nourishment that she required to bring her health back on track. The family had run out of the iron and vitamin supplements and half a dozen other medicines prescribed by the doctors and supplied free of cost at the public hospital. Naresh had no money to buy the medicines in the market.

In August 2005, a non-governmental organisation, Social Action for Literacy and Health (SALAH), published a report on the status of health and healthcare services in the flood-affected slums of Mumbai. The report highlighted the inadequacies of the public health machinery, which is unable to provide services to match its own disaster management plan.

This prompted SALAH, along with Child Relief and You (CRY), to survey the prevalence and severity of malnutrition among children living in slum colonies, including Chamunda Nagar, in Bhandup. “We approached the state government with the details...and spent the next four months pursuing them to take action,” recalled Madhukant Pathariya, project director of SALAH and Mumbai convenor of the Bal Hakk Abhiyan (BHA). “The government woke up only after we got 11 children



Measure of misery

Instead of getting grades in school, the children of Mumbai's slums are being graded on a scale of malnutrition

A survey was conducted in December 2005 of 218 randomly sampled children aged less than one year to 15 years in four slums in Bhandup, Mumbai. It showed that 135 of them were malnourished, 22 were at 'Grade 3' of serious malnourishment and 2 at 'Grade 4'. Two organisations, Social Action for Literacy and Health (SALAH) along with Child Rights and You (CRY), conducted the survey.

The sample size is small, but the survey, which used the WHO's anthropometric parameters, indicated the prevalence of malnutrition. As many as 63% of the children surveyed were malnourished, a finding consistent with UNICEF's State of the World Children Report for 2003, which records a 60% prevalence of malnutrition in Indian children.

Of the children surveyed, 11% were chronically malnourished and at major risk of mortality, while 27% were chronically malnourished in terms of weight and height parameters. Many children with milder levels of malnutrition were at high risk of progressing further into a state of emaciation.

Three children were found to have PEM (protein energy malnutrition). This means that they may be getting an adequate intake of energy but poor protein ingestion was resulting in hypoalbuminaemia and oedema. About 35% of the children were found to be anaemic.

According to SALAH, there could be nearly 2 million children in Mumbai living in slums and on pavements whose health conditions must be ascertained. About 55% of Mumbai's 12-15 million population lives in slum colonies.

admitted to hospital, which led to media headlines."

Most of the children belonged to families of construction labourers, domestic workers, rag-pickers, scavengers or beggars. "The lack of a regular income for the parents had a direct impact on the children. They were denied the benefits of the public distribution system and anganwadis," said SALAH activist Aarti Salve.

The NGO demanded that the malnourished children be provided immediate and free medical attention, their impoverished parents be paid a maintenance allowance, and families with an intake of less than 1,800 calories be included in the BPL list and issued the yellow ration cards, besides being provided with amenities like drinking water, sanitation and electricity.

The BHA wrote to the health authorities of Maharashtra, pointing out the high prevalence of malnutrition among children in the Mumbai slums. "The study looked at protein energy malnutrition (PEM). It is characterised by inadequate calories and protein for growth and maintenance. As a consequence it is infants and children that are the most susceptible because their requirements for growth include high energy and protein needs," a BHA worker said.

The Maharashtra government has done little so far. Chamunda Nagar, a colony of 81 families, has no source of water or access to toilets. The people fetch water from the nearby railway station and defecate along the tracks. "There is a direct link between the unhygienic conditions and the health of the impoverished communities," a local doctor said, "and it proves fatal in some cases, mostly that of children."

In Jyotsna Mayekar's family though, hygiene and nutrition cannot become priorities. "We are manual scavengers. We have to enter the gutters and handle human waste," Lahu said.

Shakuntala, his wife, said people like them, poor and desperate, cannot worry too much even about death. "Of my seven children, only Naresh survived. I can only hope that his daughter Jyotsna survives."

Neglecting hunger, bypassing health

Studies show that a decline in the death rate in some countries that accompanied a decline in infectious diseases, had little to do with medical technology and more to do with increasing resistance to diseases because of improved nutrition. A study of malaria deaths in India in the early-20th century similarly links starvation and immunity. But despite the prevalence of acute and chronic hunger in India, hunger has fallen off the public health map

MOHAN RAO

A medical doctor, Thomas McKeown, less well-known than he ought to be among public health workers and historians, offered us startling new insights into the advances in human longevity and health. Surveying England and Wales, he observed that significant and long-term declines in the death rate, starting in the 18th century, had occurred due to the decline in infectious and communicable diseases which disproportionately affect the poor. More remarkably, by plotting the point on the declining curve at which effective medical technology became available, he concluded that medical technology had little to do with this decline of mortality, with the possible exception of small pox.

Tuberculosis is a striking example. By the time the tubercle bacillus was identified by Thomas Koch, bacteriologist and one of the architects of the germ theory in the 1860s, the death toll due to tuberculosis had shown a long-term secular decline. By the time effective chemotherapy was discovered in the 1940s, tuberculosis had ceased to be a major public health problem in the West. The important role of chemotherapy in the control of tuberculosis cannot be denied, but this highlights the importance of other factors all too frequently forgotten in the hubris of medical technology.

The decline in death rates was related, besides tuberculosis, to almost all the major infectious diseases including bronchitis, pneumonia, whooping cough and measles. The decline in infectious diseases was unlikely to be related to changes in the virulence of the infectious agents over so short a period of time. Nor could it be attributed to salubrious changes in the environment, which had deteriorated due to industrialisation and urbanisation. Excluding these possible causes, McKeown concluded that this dramatic decline could only have been a consequence of increased general resistance to infectious diseases because of improvements in the nutritional status of the population due to wide-ranging changes in the agrarian economy.

McKeown acknowledged that the public health revolution of the late-19th century played an important role in reducing exposure to water-borne diseases such as diarrhoea, dysentery and cholera. However, at the most, these could account for a quarter to a third of the decline in mortality. Even in the case of this group of diseases, the underlying cause of the decline of lethality may well have been the same: increasing human resistance due to improvements in nutrition. Related to this in the latter part of the 19th century was an increase in the real

wages of the order of 66%.

This thesis has been a matter of some controversy. But it has been strengthened by a number of other studies, which note that other countries in the West had a similar health trajectory as living standards improved. The McKinleys reveal that modern medicine, both preventive and curative, accounted for a minor proportion of the mortality decline from infectious diseases in the United States. Preventive health measures were largely undertaken in urban areas, but the decline in the death rates extended to the rural areas as well. Data from a number of European countries over this period indicate that there were increases in mean heights, along with a decrease in class differentials in heights, both attesting to improvements in the nutritional status of the population. Fogel concluded that improvements in the nutritional status, as indicated by stature and body mass index, accounted for a substantial proportion of the decline in mortality in England, France and Sweden between 1775 and 1875.

When we turn to India or other colonised countries, there is an almost complete Malthusian consensus that over-population was the cause of both poverty and diseases. The 19th century experience in England of rising incomes associated with an increasing population is forgotten in this explanation, as is the colonial drain of resources from these countries. The Western experience is, it is maintained, not applicable to India, rendering the McKeownite model irrelevant. Solutions to the problems of ill health and disease are then sought only in the domain of medical technology.

Kinsley Davis, a guru of modern demographers, in his classic *The Population of India and Pakistan*, set the trend. He argued that the “gift of death control technologies” from the West was responsible for the decline of the death rate, commencing in the 1920s. He was referring of course to the role of DDT in the control of malaria. His primary argument, fuelled by Cold War concerns, was the urgent need for birth control technologies to control population growth. Perhaps picking up from Davis, the *Cambridge Economic History of India*, in a chapter on population, assumes that the post-1921 decline in the death rate was due to public health measures. While plague somewhat mysteriously subsided, cholera and small pox were vanquished by public health intervention.

One significant problem with these avowals is that there is very little empirical data to substantiate them. Commencing in the

1920s, this decline in the death rate, a major proportion of which was due to a decline in deaths from malaria, preceded by at least three decades the launch of the malaria eradication programme in the 1950s. Further, over the same period, mortality due to a range of diseases, for which there were no preventive measures or specific therapies, also declined. These included diseases such as cholera and small pox.

Sumit Guha dismisses Davis's explanation as "certainly not applicable to India between the Wars". Sheila Zurbriigg's work on hunger and epidemic mortality not only brings fresh insights challenging received wisdom, but also strengthens a McKeownite understanding of health history in India. Studying malaria mortality in Punjab between 1868 and 1940, Zurbriigg found the most extraordinary decline starting around 1908.

In the 41-year period between 1868 and 1908, malaria deaths were predicated upon not just rainfall, essential for malaria transmission, but soaring foodgrain prices. Malaria death rates dropped in the period between 1909 and 1941 to less than one-third of the earlier number. This drop was accompanied neither by a decline in epidemiological indices of malaria transmission, in rainfall and flooding, nor in entomological indices. More significantly, no effective preventive and therapeutic measures were widely applied. Indeed, per capita availability of quinine was so low as to make this explanation extremely implausible.

What did change after 1908 was the incidence and severity of famine or epidemic hunger. While it is undoubtedly true that under the colonial regime per capita food availability declined, what Zurbriigg's work reveals is the critical importance of state intervention: the political exigencies which compelled the British government to haltingly, hesitantly, initiate steps to control famine. These did not reduce the prevalence of diseases or indeed even their incidence; what they did do was reduce excess deaths due to diseases induced by starvation, by lowering the lethality of diseases.

The specific measure was the abandonment of the Malthusian policy of laissez faire in favour of purposive intervention through a changed famine code. This mandated public intervention through income support by employment generation in times of dearth and price rise. These steps did little to combat chronic hunger or endemic hunger. They did nevertheless leaven the excess deaths due to acute epidemic hunger and diseases that underlay the periodic subsistence crises of the period. In epidemiological terms, what changed was the lethality of diseases in response to an altered epidemiological triad.

It is this factor organised public action which lies at the heart of public health, in altering the outlay and impact of the web of factors that determine health. These include access to resources, employment, incomes, and thus food. Data on improvements in health in the 20th century in England and Wales also strengthen what is known as the McKeownite understanding of health improvement. The most marked improvement in life expectancy was in the decades of the two World Wars, despite the substantial loss of young lives (as revealed in Table I). This

again was due not to advances in healthcare but to increases in employment and, above all, food rationing.

Table I: Longevity expansion in England and Wales in the 20th century: Increase in life expectancy per decade

Decade	Male	Female
1901-1911	4.1	4.0
1911-1921	6.6	6.5
1921-1931	2.3	2.4
1931-1940	1.2	1.5
1940-1951	6.5	7.0
1951-1960	2.4	3.2

Source: Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen (1993), Hunger and Public Action, Oxford University Press, Delhi.

It is important to recollect this history because hunger has fallen off the public health landscape and indeed mindscapain India today. The Approach Paper to the Eleventh Plan, for example, in its section on health, mentions not a word about the huge prevalence of hunger in the country. Not only is hunger a major public health problem by itself, it also under-grades the massive morbidity and mortality load in the country.

A fierce debate rages in the country on the levels of poverty. Without entering into the debate, it is nevertheless the case that even those arguing that there has been substantial improvement in levels of poverty over the last decade concede that close to a third of the population still lives under the poverty line and are thus unable to meet their calorie requirements.

Data from the National Nutrition Monitoring Bureau (NNMB) indicate that there has been an improvement in the prevalence of severe under-nutrition in children between 1-5 years of age, the level declining from 11.1% in 1992 to 6.9% in 1995. However, this compares to a prevalence rate of 6.2% in 1982. While this relatively modest improvement is heartening, the level of moderate under-nutrition remains substantially unchanged at 43.5% while mild under-nutrition has increased from 36.6% in 1992 to 40.6% in 1995. Overall, the proportion



of children nutritionally normal has increased from 7.2% in 1992 to 8.5% in 1995. Again, this should be tempered with caution since the figure stood at 15.6% in 1982. This data needs to be placed in the context of a dramatic decline in per capita availability of cereals commencing in 1991. Data indicate that the per capita daily availability of cereals declined from 468.5 grams in 1991 to 428.8 grams in 1999; that of pulses declined from 41.1 grams to 38.6 grams. Indeed the NNMB notes that the average calorie consumption in the population in 1995 was below the RDA.

Data from the NFHS II however indicate higher levels of hunger than the NNMB data; they also pertain to the whole of India rather than just seven states, as is the case with the NNMB data. NFHS II reveals that almost half the children under three years of age (47%) are underweight, and a similar proportion (46%) is stunted; 18% of children below three years of age are severely undernourished, down from 20% in NFHS I. The proportion of children stunted stood at 23%. Wasting, or acute under-nutrition, affects 16% of children under three years of age. Under-nutrition is substantially higher in rural areas than in urban areas, but even in urban areas more than a third of children are either underweight or stunted. Levels of under-nutrition are also substantially higher among dalits (underweight 53.5%, severely underweight 21.2%; stunting 51.7%; wasting 16%) and adivasis (underweight 55.9%, severely underweight 26%; stunting 52.8%; wasting 21.8%). Anaemia affects nearly three-quarters of children (74%), and 46% have moderate and 5% have severe anaemia. Anaemia affects 78.3% of children among dalits, 6.6% severely, and 79.8% among the adivasis, 6.9% severely. The proportion of children weighing less than 2.5 kg at birth stood at 24% in rural areas and 21% in urban areas.

The NFHS II data also reveal a far from satisfactory nutritional status of women in the country. Data reveals that more than a third (36%) of women in the country had a BMI (body mass index) of less than 18.5, indicative of chronic hunger or chronic energy deficiency. The proportion of women who are poor, and thus more likely to be illiterate, with BMI less than 18.5, is 42.6%. Among dalits the proportion is 42.1%. Women in households with a low standard of living index have chronic hunger levels of 48.1%. Prevalence rates of chronic hunger in rural areas (40.6%) are almost double those in urban areas (22.6%).

The prevalence of anaemia is, not surprisingly, equally widespread. The overall prevalence rate is 52%, with 35% mildly anaemic, 15% moderately anaemic and 2% severely anaemic. Prevalence rates of anaemia are considerably higher for rural women (54%) than urban women (46%). The prevalence rates are 60.2% among women in households with a low standard of living, and as high as 41.9% in those with a high standard of living. Among dalits the prevalence rate is 56% and among adivasis, 64.9%. The prevalence rate among non-pregnant, non-breast-feeding women is 50.4%.

While attention has been drawn to the poor health and nutritional status of women, not enough attention has been

paid to that of men. Indeed, the NFHS has no data on the prevalence of hunger among men. The NNMB however notes that 49% of adult males also suffered from chronic energy deficiency in 1990.

In short, the nutritional data unambiguously reveals the continuing high prevalence of hunger in the population. The high prevalence of chronic hunger, in addition to acute hunger, is undoubtedly the cause of the continuing high mortality and morbidity load in the country. This is doubly tragic since it not only imposes suffering and disease, it also represents a waste of the non-realised potential among these populations of the country.

Although food is so central to the health of the population, levels of hunger do not find a mention in the National Health Policy of the country. If they do find mention in health discourses, it is frequently only anaemia as a cause of high maternal morbidity and mortality. While this is indeed high and unconscionable, neglect of hunger in public health causes far more damage than is realised.

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- Mild anaemia is defined as haemoglobin levels between 10-10.9 grams/dl for pregnant and 10.11.9 grams/dl for non-pregnant women; moderate anaemia as 7-9.9gms/dl and severe anaemia as less than 7.0 gms/dl. Anaemia is one of the leading underlying causes of death in the country among women, not just among the pregnant.

NNMB, *op cit*.

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