

COMMENT

'The Business of Hunger'

INDUSTRIAL SICKNESS IS BIG business. So is poverty-alleviation. Bureaucrats, politicians and numerous agencies, humanitarian or otherwise stand to gain enormously from "The Business of Hunger". Those who shed tears for hungry India are not really interested in eliminating hunger once and for all. As a result what all they do in a bid to make "villages hunger free" finally leads to expanding the span of hunger.

Hunger multiplied at a time when India had the bogus Public Distribution System operative, made more efficient by the addition of the prefix 'targeted', and also the office of Food Commissioner (set up in response to a petition in Supreme Court) monitoring the food distribution supplies while periodically hitting headlines for popular consumption. Hunger and malnutrition grew at a time when India had more *anganwadis* set up, and more schools being provided with mid-day meals. Not that all these interventions were useless, but certainly these have not been able to provide even a semblance of relief from the clutches of hunger.

In 2009, IFPRI ranked India 66th in Global Hunger Index for 88 countries.

Even if Mrs Sonia Gandhi raises the food allocation from the proposed 25 kgs to 35 kgs (as the Supreme Court has been demanding) and if she agrees to make some more amendments as demanded by a section of the Right to Food (RTF) campaign, will it remove hunger?

The answer is a big No.

In truth, the Right to Food campaign has failed to see beyond the entitlements, and its approach is no different from what the bureaucracy in the Ministry of Food has been recommending. Unless the government removes the structural causes thatacerbate hunger, and most of these relate to agriculture and management of natural resources, India would not be able to make any significant difference in reducing hunger.

Those who talk of hunger and right to food do not talk of the destruction of agriculture being wrought by World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the Free Trade Agreements (FTAs). Those who feel concerned about the hungry fail to see the relationship it has with the neoliberal economic policies. Nobody hears them telling how detrimental the promotion of GM crops, precision farming, contract farming, food retail and future trading will be in compounding the crisis. They never talk of farm suicides, and its relation to hunger. They never talk of micro-finance and how it adds on to hunger. And so on...

Hunger needs more than PDS ration, and that is where the advocates of 'Right to Food' are failing to focus on.

Even in Punjab, otherwise show-cased as India's food bowl, millions are faced with hidden hunger, if not starvation. Farmers' suicides in Punjab seem to be staggering by any standards. Incidentally Punjab fares much below Sudan in IFPRI Hunger Index. What a tragedy! What is more tragic is about 6.5 million metric tones of wheat grain worth Rs 5 to 8 billion, rot in the open in hundreds of Punjab households because of non-availability of storing facilities. Ninety percent of the procured grains lies in the open facing the vagaries of the inclement weather. The Ministry for Food and Agriculture has no answer. Nor do they bother about this type of criminal neglect, albeit these rotting stocks could have fed several million hungry throughout the country. □□□ *[contributed]*