

COMMENT

Problem of Plenty

INDIAN GODOWNS ARE FULL TO the brim with food grain stocks of 60 million tons which nearly three times the required buffer stocks. Then there is the storage capacity for holding only 52 million tons. About 7 million tons of grains are lying in the open-and rotting. Reportedly about 6 million tons have already become unfit for human consumption. The surplus is likely to increase further in the coming months. The monsoon crop in some parts of the country has been good though some states will have to face shortage of cereal production because of unprecedented drought. Heavy rains have led to recharge of groundwater and the winter crop is also likely to be good in West and South India.

Surprisingly, India continues to languish in the Global Hunger Index despite availability of surplus food grains. The Index is made by International Food Policy Research Institute. India was placed at 65th rank last year. It has slipped to 67th rank in the 2010 index. This is not to say that hunger has increased. There has been improvement. India secured 31.7 points in 1990. This has reduced to 24.1 points in 2010. But other countries have made yet greater improvement hence India's rank is slipping.

The Supreme Court has suggested that the surplus grains may be distributed free to the poor people instead of letting them rot in the open. But there is doubt whether this will lead to better nourishment. Also, the Government of India is not interested. Haryana is among the more prosperous states of the country-especially in agriculture. Yet its hunger status has been declared to be 'alarming.' Punjab and Tamil Nadu are not much behind. These states do not appear to have shortage of grains. It seems the problem is lack of balanced diet. Grains are provided at steeply subsidized price to the poor BPL card holders. They have available food grains aplenty. It seems, however, that they are unable to buy oils, pulses and vegetables due to shortage of cash. This imbalance in diet may be the cause of these states being high on the hunger index. Distribution of yet more grains is unlikely to improve the nutritional status of their people since these are already much available. The second cause of the low rank in the hunger index appears to be the culture of consumerism. The family uses available cash for the purchase of TV instead of nourishing vegetables. Distribution of grains is not feasible from the administrative point of view either. Huge leakage will take place as is happening in the Public Distribution System.

The problem of malnourishment is inherent in the model of economic development. In the present policy, the poor man is first deprived of his job and made destitute. Manufacturing by automatic machines is encouraged. Then the destitute is provided with free- or subsidized grains through the government machinery. The homemaker is not able to provide balanced food in absence of cash to buy oils, pulses and vegetables. The government had provided huge subsidy on urea till few years ago. That led to over-application of nitrogen and deficiency of potash and phosphates and to decline in soil productivity. Similarly, excess intake of grains is leading to imbalanced diet and resulting in malnutrition.

The World Bank has suggested that countries like India not impose ban on exports of food grains as a permanent policy. It has said that free trade in grains will be beneficial for importers as well as exporters. But there is one problem. The World Bank suggests that exports should be allowed even in times of domestic shortages if international prices are high. This can be immensely harmful for the sovereignty of the country. Only in the recent past US President Jimmy Carter had imposed ban on exports of grains to Russia to plod that country into leaving Afghanistan. India should not push itself into similar unwanted situations.

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