

GROWTH SANS IMPROVEMENT

Hunger Haunts India

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In autumn 2010 the fortunate Indians were in a frolic-some mood to watch live their country successfully hosting the XIX Commonwealth Games (CWG) with pomp and glory to mesmerize the participating nations. The night sky over New Delhi was dazzled with the spectacular show of laser beams and fireworks. The air was filled with beats of musical extravaganza. The country bagged 101 medals, its best ever sporting performance, to finish second. The event was favoured with extensive media coverage in an attempt by a powerful nation to make its mark in the global scenario. But ironically something appeared incredible about 'Incredible India'. It was just when the nation's attention was averted to the gala of the CWG, India was destined to rank 67th out of 84 countries in the Global Hunger Index (GHI) 2010 and its severity of hunger was rated "alarming". The higher the GHI values more is the hunger and vice versa. India is home to world's 42% underweight and 31% stunted kids. India alone accounts for a large share of the world's undernourished children. The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) jointly with Welthungerhilfe and Concern Worldwide released for the fifth successive year the GHI 2010. By combining the three inter-related variables viz., prevalence of child malnutrition, rate of child mortality, and the proportion of people who are calorie deficient into one index and ranking countries accordingly, the GHI works out a comprehensive analysis of data of world hunger. Does the report stir the Government? Does the Government take it seriously? The Government fails to answer. The media too prefers silence.

Hunger represents deprivation of the fundamental human 'right to food'. In September 2000, leaders of 189 nations including India signed the Millennium Development Declaration which set the Millennium Development Goal (MDG)—to halve by 2015 the number of population undernourished in the world from the 1990 level. As the world approaches the 2015 deadline the GHI 2010 offers a useful survey to measure the progress towards restraining the severity of global hunger. The GHI 2010 shows some improvement in reducing hunger index scores from 19.8 to 15.1 or by almost one-quarter over two decades since 1990. In 2010 the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) estimates that the number of undernourished population hovers around some 925 million. The year 2015 is just five years away. And India is nowhere near meeting the MDG target.

Despite its much hyped powerful economy that is every now and then compared to that of China, India ranking 67th in GHI 2010 trails behind its neighbours. Bangladesh is the sole exception which ranks 68th neck to neck with India. China ranking 9th is much ahead of India, while Sri Lanka is at the 39th, Myanmar at the 50th, Pakistan at the 52nd and Nepal at the 56th. It should be worth mentioning here that of the three equally weighted factors of GHI, India has done better than Bangladesh on 'availability of food' by its population. This is because of India's relatively overall higher production of food crops. But India scores below Bangladesh on 'child underweight' and 'child mortality', the two other important factors. In fact on the question of 'child underweight' India is among the highest in the world.

Child malnutrition is a major contributor to persistent hunger. More than 90 percent of the world's stunted children live in Africa and Asia where rates of stunting are 40 percent and 36 percent respectively.

'Stunting', 'wasting' and 'underweight' constitute the three major indicators of child malnutrition. Stunting is low height for one's age and wasting is underweight for one's height. Underweight refers to low weight for one's age and reflects either stunting or wasting or both.

Childhood shapes the future. The greatest long-term effect of hunger comes from its impact on undernourished infants and children. Mortality rate rises. The physical and mental development of a child is retarded due to malnutrition. It has a far-reaching consequence in reducing productivity. Better childhood nutrition improves adult productivity. A study conducted by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) found that an average Guatemalan boy who received a high energy, high-protein supplement in the first two years of life earned an average 46 percent higher wages as adults....compared with boys who did not receive the supplement. After age three the nutritional supplement had no effect on hourly wages, implying young children have specific nutritional needs that must be met at specific times. Almost 35 percent of the adult population in India who live in hunger and malnutrition are not gainfully employed in economic activities.

In many countries with high hunger index women belong to low social status, they are often the last and the least in the household to eat. Even the pregnant women are deprived of the care they need. Undernourished girls grow to be women with poor body mass index thus giving birth to smaller babies. After birth, infants may not be adequately breastfed for mothers are poorly nourished. They start supplementary feeding even before six months. Often infants are served food of poor nutritional quality.

There is a clear 'window of opportunity' during the thousand-day period from conception to a child's second birthday. This is the time when the mother and the child are in great need of adequate quantity of nutritious food and proper health care. It is, therefore, ideal that programmes to prevent malnutrition reach pregnant women, and children under the age of two. After the age of two this window closes rapidly and the effects of malnutrition during this period cause irreversible lifelong consequences upon health, productivity, and economic performance.

In South Asia, India is among the countries with hunger levels considerably higher than their Gross National Income (GNI) would suggest, while China has considerably lower hunger levels. Unlike the case of China economic growth has not been translated into a rapid reduction of hunger in India where the government's economic policies by their very nature are 'exclusion' based. People had been pressed under the worst food inflation in the last three decades. The government has repeatedly failed to control production and distribution mechanism of food grains in India. Instead it allows the development priorities to be dictated by the market forces. Hunger is an intrinsic and pressing development issue. Inclusive growth and state intervention to insulate the poor from market fluctuations can only ensure them in having access to food.

Hunger and malnutrition grow at a time when India has the Public Distribution System (PDS). Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY), Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS), National Maternity Benefit Scheme (NMBS), Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY) and Mid-day Meal at school. Not that all these interventions by the government are useless, but certainly these have not been able to produce a long term impact to put an end to hunger.

Over the years the PDS in India has been deliberately downsized. Even when India ranks 66th out of 88 countries on the GHI 2010, thousands of tons of food grains are stored to rot in state warehouses. Some estimate it to be a loss of 2.7 million tons of grain which can feed 40 million people. What seems to be more ironic is that a substantial quantity of grains procured by the Food Corporation of India is often being left out in the open under the naked sky due to shortage of storage facilities. The grains turn rotten at a very fast pace and on the

government's own admission, soon become unsuitable for not only human consumption but also for the animal. In the circumstance in response to a Public Interest Litigation, it took the Supreme Court, India's apex judicial body, to ask the Government to distribute the grains to the starving poor rather than letting it rotting.

The campaign for 'right to food' over the years has led to a demand for a Food Security Act. By ensuring supply of food at affordable prices the state is not doing any favour to its citizens. Ensuring food security was a key promise declared by the ruling Congress Party in its manifesto ahead of 2009 general election. When the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government came to power successively for the second time in 2009 it decided to bring in the Food Security Act with the stated objective of providing food security to all so that no one goes to bed hungry. The President of India in her first address to the joint session of Parliament announced that the UPA Government would pass a legislation ensuring food security.

Of late 'Right' has become a catch-word to the Government of India. Right to Information, Right to Employment and Right to Education are the recently government-promoted rights of an individual. Once enacted the right to food will give a precise definition of the scope and content of the individual's entitlement, specify the government's mechanism responsible for setting targets and monitoring whether targets are met to ensure that no person in the country sleeps hungry. The Food Security Act is supposed to clarify what constitutes a violation which will give an opportunity to seek administrative and legal remedies for the individuals whose right to food is violated.

The draft National Food Security Bill has been opposed by various organizations fighting for the Right to Food. Activists campaigning for the Right to Food have protested the Bill in its present form which provides 25 kg of food grains for a Below Poverty Line (BPL) household. The current quota of 35 kg of food grains per BPL household in AAY is thus effectively reduced. The reduced food entitlements for the targeted BPL will bring in food insecurity. Ideally PDS should be universal in order to avoid the inevitable exclusion errors of any targeted system. The bill should at least guarantee as much as is already being given. It is reported that National Advisory Council (NAC) is likely to widen the net of beneficiaries by an additional 100 million people and raise the quota of 25 kg food grain taking in account the nutritional factor.

The Supreme Court of India has already granted the right to get 35 kg of food grains per household along with other entitlements such as reduced prices for the grain under AAY for vulnerable sections of society, supplementary nutrition for infants and young children under ICDS, maternity entitlements under NMBS, JSY and Mid-day Meal at school. This is a minimum list of interventions that need to be included in the proposed Act if it has to look at overall nutritional needs of everyone in society.

Agriculture absorbs more than 60% of the country's labour force. Investment in agriculture should be made a concurrent part of the new enactment so that the agriculture labourers are gainfully employed at the farm and the food security is achieved at the local level. Creating adequate employment opportunities and promoting sustainable livelihoods by involving the local authorities have to be incorporated into the proposed Food Security Act. The Act must be seen as an opportunity to raise domestic food production necessary to remove hunger from the country.

Certainly there is no way that there will be no more pangs of hunger felt in this land once the Food Security Bill is enacted. The proposed Food Security Act is not to be projected as a new 'Avatar' to shake off the yoke of hunger. The proposed Act is unlikely to make a big difference unless it takes into account the ground economic realities of the problem of hunger. For this, the government must address the structural causes of poverty and hunger.

One must answer the most pertinent question as to who controls the land - a handful few who owns it or all those who cultivate it. The Act must ensure people's right to control over productive resources including land, forests, and water. Large sections of the marginalized people of this country survive on access to these natural resources. Corporate land grab will displace the peasants from their natural habitat and the means of production. Diversion of these resources must not be allowed. With a piece of legislation can the government wash its hands of accountability for the right to food to all its citizens?

Direct intervention by the state in providing food availability for poor households as well as direct targeted nutrition to improve child undernourishment and check child mortality must be ensured. The point is whether the Government does exactly what is appropriate to remove hunger. Mere words will not suffice. To quote Gabriela Mistral of Chile, the first Latin American to win the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1945, "Many of the things we need can wait. The child cannot. Right now is the time his bones are being formed, his blood is being developed. To him we cannot answer Tomorrow. His name is Today". □□□