

CHILD MALNUTRITION

Structural Violence Against Children

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A servant, engaged to look after his master's dogs, used to serve the pets milk, meat and other nutritious diets which, on the contrary, his own family was deprived of. If the dogs were sick, he called in the veterinarian. But when his own undernourished child fell ill he could afford neither nutrients nor medicine. The child died. The master expressed sympathy but gave nothing.

To witness helplessly one's own child die of malnutrition and hunger while one can do nothing is a kind of violence. The servant is left with little choice but to agree to the terms and conditions of employment decided upon by his master. The child suffering from chronic malnutrition is a victim of the structural violence.

Tuberculosis (TB) was an incurable disease in the eighteenth century. It would have been improper to term the death of a TB patient then an act of structural violence since it would have been unavoidable. But today despite substantial progress of medical science in curing this disease such death should indeed be described as an act of structural violence. Similar is the case of child malnutrition. There is dearth of neither knowledge nor financial resources to produce food worldwide in sufficient quantity to feed satisfactorily each and everyone on this planet. The problem lies with purchasing power of the poor.

Child malnutrition and hunger constitute a deliberate denial of basic human right. Violence here rules in disguise. Child mortality due to malnutrition is not described as an act of murder in popular sense the term 'murder' is used, but that does not mean that it is either accidental or natural or inevitable. It is the form of structural violence which differs in many ways from murder and other atrocities. But the seeming differences are not sufficient to dismiss the issue. In a single year more children die of diseases caused by malnutrition and hunger than all people who are killed in direct violence. Child malnutrition is so massive so firmly holding and so inhuman that it is unrealistic to imagine peace that does not look into malnutrition in the midst of plenty.

Childhood shapes the future. The worst long-term consequence of hunger comes from its impact on poor infants. Undernourished children are susceptible to contagious diseases. As a result child 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. Balanced childhood nutrition improves adult productivity

India is home to the second largest population of the underweight children in the world. It is estimated to be nearly double that of Sub-Saharan Africa. The United Nations Organisation estimates that 2.1 million Indian children die every year, i.e., four every minute before attaining the age of five. The immediate cause of their death is not any deadly disease such as cerebral palsy, cancer or AIDS. Most of them die of malnutrition and enteric diseases. Given serious attention and adequate resources such deaths are

avoidable. Of late India and China are acclaimed as the two emerging economic super-powers. China reduced malnutrition by two-third between 1990 and 2002. Today only 7% of Chinese children under-five years are underweight, whereas disgracefully the figure for India is as high as 43%. Even in the poverty stricken sub-Saharan Africa the average child-malnutrition rate does not cross 28%.

Thomas Malthus predicted in 1798 that population growth will outpace food production. His warning, however, has not come to pass. According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation, enough food is produced in the world to provide over 2800 calories a day to everyone -substantially more than the minimum required for good health. More than sufficient food is produced in the world to feed everyone at least 1.5 times current demand. Over the last 20 years, food production has been growing steadily over 2% a year, while the rate of population growth has dropped to 1.14% a year. Population growth has not overtaken food supply.

Violence usually marks out physical violence which involves striking someone with fists or by lethal weapons. The violence here is direct where the powerful perpetrator deliberately applies physical force against the opponent to inflict harm. It ranges from a conflict between the two individuals to fury and aggressions among two communities. Pogrom, genocide and war are the worst incidents of direct violence. In Independent India major incidents of direct violence recalls Partition of India in 1947 followed by communal riots and displacement, Anti-Sikh Riots in 1984, Demolition of Babri Masjid in 1992, Godhra Train Burning resulting Gujarat Pogrom in 2002, Kandhamal Violence in 2008, Police attacks on people's movement against land acquisition for chemical hub in Nandigram in 2007 and POSCO project in Orissa, Government of India's ongoing paramilitary offensives widely known as the infamous Operation Green Hunt against the Maoist rebels.

Violence covers a broad spectrum. The crafty way in which a given social structure put people slowly to death by denying their fundamental basic need for living is an act of violence. Class contradictions that reinforce a social order where the poor have been marginalised and the rich become richer may indeed be called structural violence. The arrangement ensures unequal distribution of power and resources. The handful few who benefit from structural violence are those who are at the top of the society. The poor have been the victims who suffered silently for too many years. A set of political, social and economic factors are structured in such a way as to push large section of the society on the brink of ruin.

Over the last three to four decades the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have been advocating for global commoditisation of food. Shifting of agriculture from local means of subsistence to export crops was set as a pre-condition of lending or adjustment by the two institutions. Food insecurity grew as a result of Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) and its subsequent revisions. The SAP promoted outright withdrawal of state control and total dependence on markets. The phenomenal price rise of food grains is a sequel to the IMF's overall policies of globalisation. The international agencies constantly keep pressure upon the developing countries to cut institutional credit for cultivation of food crops, reduce subsidies for small farmers and withdraw governmental regulations on manufacturer of private input provisions. Banks and financial institutions preferred speculative lending to agricultural lending. Hunger and malnutrition disclosed the fundamental shortcomings of too much reliance on market.

The cost of seeds, fertilisers, insecticides, power and informal credit increased sharply. While the developed countries have been constantly keeping pressure upon the developing countries to abolish subsidies on the pretext of trade liberalisation they largely allow subsidies to continue for the farmers of their own country. Under World Trade Organisation's (WTO) agreement developing countries were forced to liberalise their agricultural markets by reducing import duties and allowing imports at the cost of domestic production.

Farmers have been persuaded to shift from growing traditional food crops that are ideally suited to the environmental as well as soil conditions and their traditional knowledge while production of cash crops depends on improved inputs. Food crops are sold to the highest bidder. The multinational food giants command control over everything from what to produce, how to produce and finally how the produce will be marketed.

There has been a shift of priority from 'food first' to 'export first'. The Sub-Saharan and South Asian countries have switched over to cultivation of commercial crops under the direction of Breton Woods Institutions. The policy of producing more food to ensure food security is set aside. Fertile arable Southern lands are used to grow commercial crops comparatively at a lower cost. The farm output is meant for mainly export to meet the growing demand for raw materials by the industries of the rich Northern lands. Export oriented agricultural policies divert scarce land, water and human resources towards meeting demands of foreign market depriving the inland food needs. Nigeria, Ethiopia, Sudan, Kenya, Tanzania and Zaire which account for 60% population of sub-Saharan Africa experience a sharp decline in production of food crops during the last two decades when their export of commercial crops rises. A majority of hunger affected countries are net importers of cereals as a result of widespread cultivation of export-oriented non-food commercial crops during the last two decades.

Direct violence is a time bound event where both the victims and the culprits are identifiable. The police and the frenzy rioters are visible. In direct violence there is physical damage to the human body. In structural violence, however, people suffer harm indirectly, through a slow and steady process, with no clearly identifiable perpetrators. Structural violence is indirect in the sense that there may not be any person who directly injures another person. This kind of violence is in-built into the social structure.

Incidents of murder, terrorist attack, pogrom, genocide and war figure on the front-page of the tabloids, but child mortality due to malnutrition lacks full disclosure. Mass media is all set to focus on photogenic events of direct violence but is low-geared to report on child malnutrition -an eventless regular type affair. Child malnutrition is tiresomely familiar and does not yield dramatic photographs and video footage and thus rarely gets media attention. The people are more exposed to acts of direct violence through the media. Structural violence is conspicuous by its absence in media coverage.

Structural violence has become such a regular occurrence in the society that it appears as if nothing special for anyone to worry. Chronic child malnutrition is not necessarily visible. If all the children in a locality are undernourished and their body-mass indices fall short of World Health Organisation standard, or if they are not acutely underweight the authority refuses to take notice of it. The things are not as if as worse as to be taken up seriously. In course of time they are claimed to be normal and taken as

granted. The number of children who die due to malnutrition year after year is alarming, but even more alarming is the fact that so few people know them.

While the policy makers in the government admit that child malnutrition is a problem they also plead that they cannot solve it simply because they do not have the resources. 'Cannot' defence is an attempt to evade responsibility. The neglect is deliberate. It casts shadow upon the government's tall claim of higher economic growth.

Overcoming malnutrition requires not just giving up denial but also resolving that it gets the top most priority for India. If the government can squander huge fund for defence, why cannot it spend adequate amount to ensure food security for all. The government neither has ever lowered nor will ever lower the defence budget.

Child malnutrition proves state's violation of the basic human rights. The basic human 'right to food' is not negotiable. Hunger is an intrinsic and pressing development issue. The government must honour and implement the right to appropriate food for all its residents. They must have access to food quantitatively sufficient and qualitatively good enough for human consumption so that they live a healthy life with dignity. No one will starve. The government however prefers silence. The holy Constitution looks the other way to the state's culpable act of indifference.

Child malnutrition is a problem which should be addressed at its ground reality. Any workable solution will require those fortunate powerful few of the society working in collaboration with multinational corporations to forego some of their privileges. Direct intervention by the state in providing food availability for poor households as well as to improve child nutrition and check child mortality must be ensured. 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". □□□