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Delink Entitlements

We the undersigned economists do not consider the official national poverty lines set by the Planning Commission, at Rs 32 and Rs 26 per capita per day for urban and rural areas, respectively, to be acceptable benchmarks to measure the extent of poverty in India. In any case, irrespective of the methodology we adopt to measure poverty, the number of poor and hungry people in the country remains unacceptably large.

While academic debates can continue on the appropriate measure of poverty in India, its extent and whether it is decreasing over time, we strongly believe that it is unacceptable and counterproductive to link the official poverty estimates to basic entitlements of the people, especially access to food. Official surveys of nutritional intakes and outcomes indicate that under-nutrition is much more widespread than income poverty, however defined. It is also widely recognised that the targeted public distribution system (PDS) introduced since 1997 has done more harm than good by creating divisions even among the poor and has led to massive errors of exclusion. Recent evidence clearly establishes that states which have moved towards near universalisation of the PDS have performed much better in increasing offtake and reducing leakages.

Restoring the universal PDS appears to us as the best way forward in combating hunger and poverty. This is not only feasible within the available fiscal space of the union government but must be a policy priority in the backdrop of high and persistent food price inflation.

Ashok Mitra, Thomas Isaac, Amiya Kumar Bagchi, S K Thorat, Prabhat Patnaik, Atul Sarma, G S Bhalla, Yoginder K Alagh, S Subramanian, Pulin Nayak, Ravi Srivastava, Mahendra Dev, R S Deshpande, C P Chandrasekhar, Ritu Dewan, Surjit Singh, Alakh Sharma, Nirmal Kumar Chandra, Sanjay Reddy, Jeemol Unni, J B G Tilak, Jayati Ghosh, and others

Hypocrisy of 'Poverty Line'

The People's Union for Democratic Rights (PUDR) wishes to draw public attention to the recent controversy where

the Planning Commission informed the Supreme Court that anyone earning more than Rs 32 in urban and Rs 26 in rural areas per day is considered above the poverty line. Article 43 of India's Constitution lays down that "(t)he state shall endeavour to secure by suitable legislation or economic organisation or in any other way to all workers, agricultural, industrial or otherwise, work, a living wage, conditions of work ensuring a decent standard of life and full enjoyment of leisure and social and cultural opportunities". India's low ranking in major human development indices and the fact that an overwhelming majority of the population continue to be denied this conceptualisation of what would be considered a "fair wage", raises disturbing questions with regard to the official standpoint on poverty.

In 1957, at the 15th Indian Labour Conference (ILC), moves were made towards setting norms for fixing a minimum wage, a euphemism for a "living wage". The 15th ILC recommended that in the first place the standard working class family should be taken to mean husband, wife and two children below the age of 14 years. Second, minimum food requirement should be calculated on the basis of 2,700 calories daily per adult man, 2,160 for woman and 1,620 for the child. Further, clothing requirement of 72 yards for a family per annum would be added while housing allowance corresponding to the minimum area provided for under the government's industrial housing schemes. Lastly, fuel, lighting and other items of expenditure should constitute 20% of the total minimum wage.

While the government did not accept these recommendations, the Supreme Court approved these norms through its judgment in the case of *U Unichoyi vs State of Kerala* (AIR 1962 SC 12), thereby giving them force of law. The apex court through its judgment in *Workmen vs Reptakos Brett & Co Ltd* (AIR 1992 SC 504) added a sixth norm – 25% of the total minimum wage was supposed to cover children's education, medical treatment, recreation, etc. The Court observed that these six norms would be nothing more than minimum wage at "subsistence level" which the workers must get "at all times and under all circumstances".

Adherence to the six norms, let alone the five norms laid down by the 15th ILC, has been followed in the breach. A “living wage”, at current wage rates declared under the Minimum Wages Act, comes to Rs 247 per day for unskilled labour. The Rs 32 touted by the Planning Commission as “below poverty line” is seven times less than the minimum wage which itself is a “subsistence wage”.

PUDR reiterates that the letter and spirit of Article 43 which forms part of the Directive Principles be the basis for providing basic requirement to all citizens of India so that their right to a life of dignity and liberty can be ensured.

Harish Dhawan, Paramjeet Singh
Secretaries, PUDR

DELHI

Teaching and Research

Let me congratulate Maithreyi Krishnaraj for pointing out the quality of teaching as the chief determinant of the quality of research in social sciences in India (“Quality of Teaching and Research”, EPW, 27 August 2011). As a person with long years of experience of university teaching in India, I have always felt that many do not take teaching as a serious activity in India. If the professor or lecturer is good in his profession, he/she concentrates more on engaging in professional services and network building than on teaching or doing serious research. An evaluation of the quality of teaching in terms of its contents, coverage and delivery has never been a consideration for academic advancement in our universities and colleges. In most of the institutions, there does not exist any mechanism for a thorough assessment of the quality of teaching. As teaching is not rigorously carried out in class rooms, students are never well equipped with theory and analytical tools in the subjects that they study, as a result of which when they take up research careers in the future, they are not able to do a good job.

On research, one can say with a good degree of confidence that research supervision is not a very seriously pursued activity. A good number of research supervisors are not competent enough to carry out the job, as they themselves did not have an

opportunity to receive thorough training as PhD scholars. Those who are good researchers spend more time on their own research than on the work of their students. Many of the supervisors have either not published or are not well trained to publish in standard professional journals.

M K Sukumaran Nair
University of Botswana

Statement of Protest

We write to protest the denial of entry to David Barsamian by immigration authorities at the New Delhi airport in the early hours of 23 September 2011, and we write to draw attention to the growing arbitrariness of the Indian government in dealing with dissent of any kind.

David Barsamian is a veteran broadcaster, and founder and director of Alternative Radio, a weekly one-hour public affairs programme offered free to all public radio stations in the us, Canada, Europe and beyond. For more than 25 years Alternative Radio has provided information, analyses and views that are frequently ignored in other media. Structured around intensive interviews conducted by David Barsamian, these programmes are carried by over 125 radio stations and heard by millions of listeners.

David is a friend for many of us, but he is an older friend of India. He first came as a young man in 1966, and has since returned innumerable times, immersing himself in its music, languages and poetry. He has taught himself Urdu and Hindi, learned to play the sitar, and closely follows events in the subcontinent.

When he was deported on 23 September he had a visa which was valid for another five years, and although he last visited in February 2011, he had no intimation or warning that he was in violation of any of the conditions under which his visa was issued. The only thing that the immigration officers were able to tell him was that he was “banned” from entering the country, and that the reasons were a “secret”.

The deportation of David Barsamian unfortunately mirrors the manner in which Richard Shapiro was arbitrarily stopped from entering India in November 2010. We are dismayed that this power to send people

back from the airport is slowly becoming a weapon, used to discipline and silence people who draw any kind of attention to uncomfortable truths about India.

We therefore ask that the ban on David Barsamian and others like Richard Shapiro be revoked, and the Government of India not impede their return to India.

We demand that the right to travel and the right to free exchange of ideas between scholars, journalists, artists, and human rights defenders be respected and protected, and that government agents not authorise the denial of entry and eviction of visitors to India, or monitor their movement. Free exchange of ideas is one of the most basic human rights and values in free democratic societies. Freedom of travel is one of the most important avenues for furthering such exchange among peoples. Recognising this, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which India has ratified, protects freedom of expression, right to travel and scientific exchange.

Abha Sur, Amit Bhaduri, Anuradha Chenoy, Angana Chatterji, Anthony Arnove, Aruna Roy, Arundhati Roy, Arpita Banerjee, Basharat Peer, Biju Mathew, David Ludden, Gyanendra Pandey, Harsh Dobhal, Hussain Askari, Jean Dreze, Joel Geier, Kamal Mitra Chenoy, Kamala Visveswaran, Lalitha Gopalan, Mirza Waheed, Noam Chomsky, Madhu Bhaduri, Pankaj Mishra, Parvaiz Bukhari, Prashant Bhushan, Rahul Roy, Romila Thapar, Sanjay Kak, Satya Sivaraman, Shabnam Hashmi, Shohini Ghosh, Shuddhabrata Sengupta, Simona Sawhney, Suvir Kaul, Sherry Wolf, Tariq Thachil, Vrinda Grover and others.

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