Food Security: Beating Around the Bush

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Looking back at the food situation in India during the last ten years, one lesson stands out: the poor do not count for much in public policy. The problem is not new, but if anything, it has intensified in this period of growing inequality and elitism.

Ten years ago, the first National Family Health Survey (1992-93) established that India is one of the most undernourished countries in the world. According to standard anthropometric indicators such as "weight for age", about half of all Indian children are undernourished. Only one or two countries, such as Bangladesh, are doing worse than India in this respect. Undernutrition levels in India are about twice as high as in sub-Saharan Africa, a continent ravaged by internal wars, periodic famines, and the spread of AIDS.

The most startling aspect of the nutrition situation in India is that it is not much of an issue in public debates and electoral politics. To illustrate, consider the coverage of nutrition issues in the mainstream media. *The Hindu*, one of the finest English-medium dailies, publishes two opinion articles every day on its editorial page. In a recent count of these opinion articles over a period of six months (January to June 2000), it was found that health, nutrition, education, poverty, gender, human rights and related social issues *combined* accounted for barely 30 out of 300 articles. Among these 300 articles, not *one* dealt with health or nutrition.[1]

In 1993-94, the 50th Round of the National Sample Survey highlighted another disturbing aspect of the nutrition situation in India: there is no food security system worth the name. At that time, the main plank of public intervention in this field was the "public distribution system" (PDS). Access to the PDS was supposed to be "universal", but in practice, only a privileged minority of the population was covered. For instance, in India as a whole, barely one fourth of the survey households reported buying foodgrain from the PDS at that time. Further, access to the PDS was heavily biased against the poorer states, against rural areas within the poorer states, and even against poor households within specific states or areas. In

[1] Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen (2002), *India: Development and Participation* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press), page 302.

states such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, only 4 per cent of all households were buying foodgrain from the public distribution system in 1993-4.

During the nineties, India was one of the fastest-growing economies in the world. At the same time, however, economic inequalities sharply increased: richer states did better than the poorer ones, urban areas forged ahead of rural areas, and economic disparities also increased within urban areas. While the urban middle and upper classes enjoyed an unprecedented boom in living standards, economic conditions barely improved for underprivileged sections of the population. After adjustment for comparability with earlier rounds, the 55th round of the National Sample Survey suggests that average per-capita expenditure in rural areas was not even 10 per cent higher in 1999-2000 than in 1993-94. Rural poverty even seems to have increased in some of the poorer states, such as Assam and Orissa.[2]

Meanwhile, the failure to build a credible food security system continued unabated. The quality of the public distribution system did not improve, and aggregate offtake declined. The transition to a “targeted” PDS in 1997 alleviated some of the earlier problems, but created new ones, especially the pernicious division of the rural population into two artificial classes: APL and BPL households (above and below the “poverty line”, respectively). Financial allocations for rural employment programmes declined sharply. Nutrition programmes such as the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) continued to limp along with shoestring budgets, scant monitoring and fragile accountability mechanisms. Public health services were grossly neglected, to the extent that the steady decline of infant mortality virtually came to a standstill. No major initiative was taken to address the problem of endemic hunger.

Against this background, it is perhaps not surprising that the second round of the National Family Health Survey (1998-99) showed virtually no improvement in child nutrition compared with the 1992-93 figures. To illustrate, the proportion of children with weight-for-age below two standard deviations of international norms was 53 per cent in 1992-93 and 47 per cent in 1998-99. If the child undernourishment figures continue to decline at this sluggish rate of one percentage point per year, it will take another *forty* years before India achieves nutrition levels similar to those of China today.

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[2] Angus Deaton and Jean Drèze (2002), “Poverty and Inequality in India: A Reexamination”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 7 September.

The second NFHS survey also uncovered further evidence of rising inequality in the nineties: anthropometric indicators improved more for urban areas than for rural areas, and more for boys than for girls. For instance, the proportion of undernourished children based on weight-for-age criteria declined by 7 percentage points for urban boys between 1992-93 and 1998-99, but only 3 percentage points for rural girls. In other words, the time required for rural Indian girls to "catch up" with their Chinese counterparts if present rates of improvement continue is not forty years, but eighty years or so.

The nineties ended with a baffling accumulation of food stocks in the midst of widespread hunger. Foodgrain procurement leaped from an average of 20 million tonnes per year in 1991-97 to 25 million tonnes in 1998, 30 million tonnes in 1999, 35 million tonnes in 2000 and 40 million tonnes in 2001. Meanwhile, foodgrain offtake through the public distribution system did not increase. In fact, it declined from 17 million tonnes per year in the early nineties to 12 million tonnes per year around the end of the decade. The result was a yawning gap between procurement and distribution, and ballooning food stocks. India's foodgrain mountain, the largest in world history by a long margin, reached a peak of nearly 70 million tonnes in mid-2002.

The most incongruous part of the story is that the bulk of this stock was accumulated during a period of intense drought in large parts of the country. At a time of widespread hunger in drought-affected areas, the government was busy hoarding food on an unprecedented scale and striving to keep prices *up*, making it that much harder for drought-affected people to buy food on the market. A survey conducted in Rajasthan in early 2001 found many signs of a survival crisis among those who were not lucky enough to obtain employment on relief works: reduced food intake, rising indebtedness, distress migration, among others.

Around mid-2001, the sight of "hunger amidst plenty" became so glaring that something had to be done about it. After all, the prestige of the country was at stake. Stories of starving people eating poisonous mango kernels in Orissa while rotting grain stocks were thrown into the sea did not go down too well with the readers of the *New York Times*. Besides, at Rs 2,200 a tonne, the carrying costs of the food stocks (about Rs 14,000 crores in 2001-2) became a serious issue. The Supreme Court also started breathing down the neck of the

government from mid-2001 onwards, after the People's Union for Civil Liberties (Rajasthan) launched a public interest litigation on this issue.

None of this, however, generated a serious concern for endemic undernutrition in the corridors of power. Instead, the central government embarked on a vigorous export drive. With the United States looking the other way (because of its own record of dubious farm subsidies), WTO rules were no serious barrier and the Indian government started selling large quantities of grain to private exporters at throwaway prices. Between April 2002 and June 2003, India exported about 17 million tonnes of grain – more than one million tonnes *each month*.

At home, the government resorted to high-profile gestures to appease the Supreme Court and the restless public. A typical example is the Prime Minister's speech of 15 August 2001 (Independence Day), which announced a massive programme of employment generation, the Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana (SGRY). The programme was supposed to generate 100 crore person-days of employment per year at a staggering cost of Rs 10,000 crores. In fact, half of this amount consisted of valuing five million tonnes of grain *already procured* at an inflated price (the so-called "economic cost") of Rs 10 per kilo, and the other half was mainly a repackaging of earlier employment schemes.

Recent evidence suggests that the resources allocated to SGRY have been grossly misused. For a long time, the bulk of the gravy went to Andhra Pradesh, as a token of appreciation of Chandrababu Naidu's support for the NDA coalition at the centre. According to a recent study, corruption in food-for-work programmes in Andhra Pradesh "resulted in most of the free rice from the government not reaching the intended beneficiaries".[3] In other states, SGRY had an excruciatingly long take-off, and even today, there is little evidence of it on the ground. Recent field investigations shed some useful light on the problem: funds are under-utilized; whatever work takes place is often mechanised; and the muster rolls are routinely fudged.[4] At the end of this long chain of looting and fudging, actual employment generation is negligible.

[3] Priya Deshingkar and Craig Johnson (2002), "Transfers to the Poor and Back: The Case of the Food for Work Programme in Andhra Pradesh", draft Working Paper, Overseas Development Institute, London.

[4] See e.g. Shonali Sen (2003), "A Case Study of the Social Safety Net in Rural Uttar Pradesh", mimeo, Centre for Equity Studies, New Delhi. This case study concludes that "most of the grain intended for these public works has been siphoned off".

In short, the availability of massive food stocks during the last few years have not led to any major initiative in the field of food security. Committed civil servants did commendable work in specific areas, such as Baran district in Rajasthan, but the basic framework of food policy remained unchanged. The only significant breakthrough was the introduction of cooked mid-day meals in primary schools. Even this would not have happened without the Supreme Court cracking the whip.

The silver lining is that this whole episode has led to greater awareness of the problem of endemic hunger and opened up new possibilities of public action. The monstrosity of the situation that prevailed during the last few years, as people starved in the shadow of food mountains, has led to a healthy renewal of public concern with the issue. The coverage of hunger and nutrition matters in the print media, for instance, has sharply increased.[5] And perhaps for the first time in independent India, there are good prospects of endemic hunger becoming a lively political issue.

The main challenge ahead is to bring democratic practice to bear more forcefully on issues of hunger and nutrition. A good illustration of this possibility is the public interest litigation (PIL) initiated in April 2001 by the People's Union for Civil Liberties (Rajasthan) with a writ petition submitted to the Supreme Court. The litigation is far from over, but meanwhile, useful interim orders have been passed. Their cutting edge has been sharpened by the appointment of two Commissioners (Dr. N.C. Saxena and Mr. S.R. Sankaran), in charge of monitoring the implementation of Court directives on this matter. Further, this eventful litigation has facilitated the growth of public action for the right to food around the country.

The recent introduction of cooked mid-day meals in primary schools bears testimony to the fact that this process can make a real difference. The Supreme Court order on this matter, dated 28 November 2001, is yet to be implemented in several states (notably Bihar, Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh), but nevertheless, there is a firm trend towards universal mid-day meals in primary schools. With 50 million children covered, India's mid-day meal programme is already the largest nutrition programme in the world, by far. With adequate public pressure, another 50 million children are likely to get on board within a year or so, and

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[5] See e.g. Diya Banerjee (2003), "Starving Skeletons: Hunger in Media since 1980's", mimeo, Lady Sri Ram College, New Delhi.

the quality of mid-day meal programmes could also be radically enhanced. This would be no small achievement at a time of deep hostility to government intervention and growing abdication of state responsibility for the well-being of Indian citizens.

Universal, nutritious mid-day meals for all school children (and potentially, out-of-school children also) would be an important step towards food security. Many other aspects of the right to food can also be secured through similar interventions, involving both legal action and social action. Significant examples include the improvement and universalisation of anganwadi services, the adoption of a national Employment Guarantee Act, and robust social security entitlements for destitute households.

Having said this, much more is required to secure the right to food in the full sense of the term. Ultimately, the right to food needs to be linked with other economic and social rights, such as the right to education, the right to work, the right to information and the right to health. These economic and social rights complement and reinforce each other. Taken in isolation, each of them has its limitations, and may not even be realizable within the present structure of property rights. Taken together, however, they hold the promise of major changes in the balance of power in Indian society.

To put it another way, there is an urgent need to revive the vision of radical social change embodied in the Directive Principles of the Indian Constitution. As Dr. Ambedkar, the main architect of the Constitution, saw it, the realisation of economic and social rights was a paramount requirement of democracy in the full sense of the term. The Directive Principles were central to this project. Specifically, their role was to bring about "economic and social democracy", without which political democracy would remain ineffective if not hollow. Policy developments in the last ten years have been diametrically opposed to this revolutionary conception of democracy. However, the tide may turn sooner than expected. Indeed, it is an interesting paradox of contemporary politics that even as power is becoming more concentrated, it also looks more fragile.