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## EDITORIAL

edit@epw.in

## CIRCULATION

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GANPATRAO KADAM MARG, LOWER PAREL

MUMBAI 400 013

PHONE: (022) 4063 8282

FAX: (022) 2493 4515

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## DIRECTOR

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C 212, AKURLI INDUSTRIAL ESTATE

KANDIVALI (EAST), MUMBAI 400 101

PHONES: (022) 2887 3038/41

FAX: (022) 2887 3038

epwrf@vsnl.com

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**Food Entitlements**

[This is an open letter to Manmohan Singh, Prime Minister of India.]

We are a group of research scholars and student volunteers who have just spent three weeks surveying the public distribution system (PDS) around the country. We are writing to share a few thoughts on the National Food Security Act in the light of this experience.

Our survey covered more than 100 randomly-selected villages spread over nine states (Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Orissa, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, and Uttar Pradesh). We inspected the local fair price shops and interviewed more than a thousand "below-the-poverty-line" (BPL) households. Oblivious of the weather, we reached the country's remotest nooks and crannies and spared no effort to understand the people's situation and views.

This survey points to an impressive revival of the PDS across the country. In all the sample states, with the notable exception of Bihar, there have been major initiatives in the recent past to improve the PDS and these efforts are showing results. Most of the sample households were getting the bulk if not the whole of their food-grain entitlements under the PDS (up to 35 kg per month, at a nominal price). The time when up to half of the PDS grain was "diverted" to the open market is gone.

In our survey, for example, in Andhra Pradesh, where the average monthly purchase of grain was 14.9 kg, and the average purchase as a proportion of the entitlement was 99%, as many as 91% of the sampled households preferred food to cash. The corresponding figures in some of the other states: Orissa (29.2 kg, 97% and 88%), Chhattisgarh (33.3 kg, 95% and 90%), Tamil Nadu (17.9 kg, 92% and 71%) and Rajasthan (26 kg, 87% and 60%). It was only in Bihar where average monthly purchases were 11 kg and purchase as a proportion of entitlement was 45% that a majority of the respondents (54%) preferred cash.

We also found that the PDS had become a lifeline for millions of rural households. A well-functioning PDS virtually guarantees that there is always food in the house. This is an enormous relief to people who

live on the margin of subsistence, and a welcome support for everyone. It is a big step towards the end of hunger, which has blighted this country for centuries.

The bad news is that the BPL list is very defective. In many states, entire communities have been left out, and almost everywhere, there are enormous exclusion errors. This has severely reduced the effectiveness of the PDS as a tool of food security. Therefore, we support the case made recently by a group of academic economists for a "near-universal PDS", whereby all households are entitled to food subsidies unless they meet well-defined exclusion criteria.

The said economists also believe that there is a strong (though unspecified) "theoretical case" for cash transfers as an alternative to the PDS. We discussed this proposal with the respondents, and found that a large majority opposed it. The reluctance was particularly strong in areas with a well-functioning PDS, and among poorer households. Further, we felt that the reasons they gave for opposing cash transfers were generally quite thoughtful and convincing.

In most cases, the reasons pertained in one way or another to food security – an overwhelming concern for poor households. For instance, many respondents were worried that money might be misused or frittered away. Where markets are distant, they wondered where they would buy grain from, and how they would cope if there is a sudden increase in local food prices. Even where markets are accessible, there were apprehensions, such as fear that traders might raise prices if the PDS is closed. Similarly, the local bank was often said to be too far, overcrowded, or difficult to handle. Many respondents had a bitter experience of the banking system in the context of National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) wage payments. In contrast, the familiarity and convenience of the local fair price shops were widely valued. It is only in areas where the PDS was not working, notably Bihar and parts of Uttar Pradesh, that we found substantial interest in cash transfers as a possible alternative.

Accordingly, we urge you to ensure that the National Food Security Act includes the strongest possible safeguards against a hasty transition from food entitlements to cash transfers.

We do recognise, of course, that there is enormous scope – and urgent need – for further improvements in the PDS. We have some suggestions on this too, and would be glad to discuss them with you at your convenience.

**Anindita Adhikari** (independent researcher, Patna); **Ankita Aggarwal** (independent researcher, Delhi); **Megha Bahl** (Delhi School of Economics, Delhi); **Pooja Balasubramanian** (St Xavier's College, Mumbai); **Balu** (Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi); **B Lakshmi** (Kirori Mal College, Delhi); **Manish Choudhary** (Hindu College, Delhi); **Sakina Dhorajiwala** (Jai Hind College, Mumbai); **Jean Drèze** (University of Allahabad); **Anchal Dutt** (Law College, Delhi University); **Aashish Gupta** (University of Allahabad); **Aparna John** (independent researcher, Delhi); **Purava Joshi** (St Xavier's College, Mumbai); **Samyuktha Kanan** (IIT, Madras); **Reetika Khara** (IIT, Delhi); **Sirus Joseph Liberio** (University of Mumbai); **Radhika Lokur** (St Xavier's College, Mumbai); **Aleesha Mary Joseph** (St Stephen's College, Delhi); **Swathi Meenakshi** (Anna University, Madras); **Karuna Muthiah** (independent researcher, Dindigul); **Bijayani Mohanty** (independent researcher, Bhubaneswar); **Rajkishore Mishra** (independent researcher, Bhubaneswar); **Kuber Nag** (IIT, Madras); **Sudha Narayanan** (Cornell University); **Soheb Niazi** (Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi); **Gaurav Poddar** (St Stephen's College, Delhi); **Raghav Puri** (Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, Singapore); **Aakriti Rai** (St Xavier's College, Mumbai); **Kshama Raj** (University of Hyderabad); **Alamu Rathinasabapathy** (Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi); **Sambhu Sahu** (independent researcher, Bhubaneswar); **Ria Singh Sawhney** (Law College, Delhi University); **Trishna Senapaty** (Delhi School of Economics, Delhi); **Kanika Sharma** (Lady Shri Ram College for Women, Delhi); **Ujjaineesh Sharma** (Delhi School of Economics, Delhi); **Dipa Sinha** (Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi); **Neenu Suresh** (Law College, Delhi University); **Chitrang Upadhyay** (Zakir Hussain College, Delhi); **Jijo Vadukoot** (University of Mumbai); **Eklavya Vasudeva** (Law College, Delhi University)

## Rehabilitating SPOs

The People's Union for Democratic Rights (PUDR) welcomes the Communist Party of India (Maoist)'s statement following the landmark judgment of the Supreme Court (SC) on the Salwa Judum reassuring the special police officers (SPOs) that the Maoists do not see them as enemies. The Maoists have extended their cooperation towards ensuring a smooth transition for the SPOs by undertaking the responsibility of rehabilitating

them and ensuring their livelihood if they return to their villages, and break all connections with state forces. This statement is of significance for the following reasons:

- (1) It allays the hysteria being built up in the media about the retaliatory violence that will be wreaked by the Maoists following the disarming and disbanding of the SPOs.
- (2) It dispels anxieties on the part of the SPOs concerning their safety and livelihood.
- (3) It alerts us to the possibility of the Chhattisgarh government simply reconstituting the Koya commandos under another name.

The Maoists are thus attempting to repair the schism in the fabric of adivasi society fostered by the state through the Salwa Judum. We hope that the central and state governments will not in any way hinder this possibility and will indeed act on the SC judgment in both letter and spirit.

**Paramjeet Singh, Harish Dhawan**  
Secretaries, PUDR

DELHI

## 'A Disappearing Number'

It is no wonder that Complicité's *A Disappearing Number*, a play loosely based on Hardy's admiration for Ramanujan, has won several awards in the west and continues to run to packed houses in the West End of London. It was recently brought to Mumbai and Hyderabad through the good offices of the British Council and Prithvi Theatre. Its excellent stagecraft provides a magical evening during which the mysteries of life and death intertwine with the mysteries of mathematics, the queen of sciences, made even more heady with dashes of Bharatanatyam, a glimpse into the incomprehensible beliefs of a strict south Indian brahmin, and videography of old Madras, while flight numbers and telephone numbers reel relentlessly in the background.

Ramanujan's life was enclosed within the theory of numbers, not only loved by pure mathematicians for its sheer beauty, as believed by Hardy, who lived within the privileged cloisters of Cambridge, but as the recently held International Congress of Mathematicians proclaimed in Hyderabad, it is intimately involved in several practical applications, and even in elucidating the very nature of the Universe. It was quite in the fitness of things, therefore, that the assembled mathematicians of the world

should view this postmodern theatrical reprise of the un-understood tragic life of a genius, lost as soon as it was found.

And yet, the light shone on Ramanujan continues to strengthen the Orientalist 200-year old western engagement with India, worshipping its presumed mystic qualities, which the modern "man" can never fully comprehend, just as he cannot comprehend infinity, while the disconnect between the Enlightenment-produced culture of the west and the ancient pagan world of India is re-emphasised by odd bits of dance, music, and chanting thrown in for good effect. Incidentally, it is this awe-filled but distanced view of the east which the west persists in maintaining that in a practical sense fills the coffers of diverse god-men who provide therapy with magic.

The theatrical production's own magic will continue to work in the west, but no popular peep into this man's life, whether on the stage or within the covers of a book, raises questions of immediate interest to Indians. We are in the midst of demanding that education should be a fundamental right, and yet this genius was a self-taught man, and his memory raises the urgent question whether received colonial schooling helps or extinguishes creativity in young minds. No biography of his adequately explores how any chance of marital happiness he ever had was destroyed by his obsessively possessive mother, an authoritarian remnant of Indian cultural life that bedevils families even today, sometimes leading to the extremes of dowry deaths or domestic violence on young brides. The largest unexplored question is the crippling impact of poverty on Ramanujan's life, a reminder of mythic grandeur that the continued neglect of the masses of India is a crime against its people and against its creator. Ramanujan's attempt at suicide in England should not be trivialised as another incomprehensible act of a mystic Hindu but seen clearly as the result of the deep alienation he felt there as a colonial – a social distancing which sometimes produces today the astonishing phenomena of home-grown terrorists on western soil.

Ramanujan has left us not only many mathematical conjectures to be solved, but vital social questions which the world in its wilful ignorance refuses to view.

**Vithal Rajan**

HYDERABAD