

HUNGER AND STARVATION: SCARCITY OF FOOD OR SCARCITY OF DEMOCRACY?

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ABSTRACT

The paper has a two-fold objective, one it begins with an appraisal of various stages of debates on food security based on the focus of arguments. It examines the various major arguments on food security such as Food availability Decline Argument, Green Revolution Approach and Entitlement and Deprivation Theory. Second, the paper examines the relationship between political processes and the prevention of hunger. The paper analyses the role of democracy in the elimination of hunger and starvation. The paper looks into the query of why do hunger, food insecurity and poverty persist in a democratic society amidst surplus food production and the role of democratic politics in the eradication of hunger and poverty. It argues for the need of integrating democracy into debates on poverty and food security and looks at the right to food and role of state in the Constitution of India. The enormous growth in global food production and an increase in per capita availability of food are necessary but not sufficient conditions for eliminating hunger and malnutrition. However, aggregate availability is an essential condition for food security. The people who do not have any land on which cultivate or any other alternative source income to buy food go hungry no matter how much food grains available in the market.

Keywords: Food Security, Hunger and Starvation, Democracy

INTRODUCTION

The world has an adequate quantity of food, yet millions of poor people go hungry every day. Food is the basic need for the survival of human beings. Poverty and hunger are the most terrible forms of deprivation. Everyone has a fundamental right to be free from hunger and have access to sufficient, and nutritious food for a healthy life. Eating is a biological necessity for survival and productive life. In India, the erstwhile Planning Commission adopted the caloric norm to decide the quantum of poverty. Minimum per day energy requirements of 2,400 calories per individual in the rural areas and 2,100 calories in the urban areas has been taken as the standard

norm to determine poverty. Measuring poverty in terms of mere calories is misleading because other requirements are necessary for a decent human existence. Making these commodities available at affordable prices to the people and enhancing their purchasing power has become the primary roles of the democratic state in modern times.

In India, the problem of hunger and starvation is widespread despite self-sufficiency in food grains production. The recent data of production confirms that, "In 2017-18, total food grain production was estimated at 275 million tonnes (MT). India is the largest producer (25% of global production), consumer (27% of world consumption) and importer (14%) of pulses in the world. India's annual milk production was 165 MT(2017-18), making India the largest producer of milk, jute and pulses, and with world's second-largest cattle population 190 million in 2012. It is the second-largest producer of rice, wheat, sugarcane, cotton and groundnuts, as well as the second-largest fruit and vegetable producer, accounting for 10.9% and 8.6% of the world fruit and vegetable production, respectively."ⁱ

The food insecurity is now affecting many states across India. Hunger and food insecurity are a devastating and unbearable human experience. It is intensely painful, and ultimately, it kills human beings if it goes long enough. Hunger is an experience that dominates and diminishes all other social and economic advancements. Different types of deprivations not only physical but also social and economic. Food insecurity prevents the poor from taking advantage of opportunities that become available to them to improve, be it education, health, work etc. Persistence of hunger indeed reflects a harsh denial of social and economic rights. Apart from causing visible pain and suffering, hunger and poverty also cast a shadow over the future of society. Extreme hunger is a social constrain which defies every effort of an individual or a community to improve them economically and socially. Hunger affects the health of people, which directly impacts productivity. It reduces the physical potential of a person to work and be more industrious. It makes people more vulnerable to disease. Hunger and its consequences are not only morally and ethically unacceptable, but also entail a high social and economic cost to the nations. Moreover, the hopelessness and anger that hunger and poverty generate can become a breeding ground for aggression hostility and transgression in society.

DEBATES ON HUNGER AND FOOD SECURITY

The discourse on hunger and food insecurity can be divided broadly into three stages based on the focus of the debate. The first stage characterised by a focus on the shortage of food availability at the global and national levels. There have always been assumptions and predictions about the world's capacity to produce adequate quantity of food. Malthus formally framed the debate about whether food resources would be sufficient to feed an increasing world population in his 'Essay on the Principle of Population'. Malthus saw the food problem in terms

of the growth of food production falling behind the growth of the population. He sees it both these growths as being primarily determined by nature. Malthus argued that food production growing in arithmetic progression, while population grew in geometric progression, the growth of population overtaking the growth of food production.

Since then, the same fundamental question debated from different perspectives. The various approaches to the food problem in the literature can be divided broadly into two categories. One group looks at the issue from the standpoint of natural sciences and engineering and relates the food problem to various technological factors. The other group deliberate on social issues, including political economy, and look at the food problem primarily in social and economic conditions. As Amartya Sen explains, "At the risk of oversimplification, the two classes of approach may be called 'nature-focused' and 'society-focused', respectively. These are not, of course, pure, unmixed categories; the classification reflects the relative emphasis that is placed on the different factors. It is really a question of focus rather than of coverage."ⁱⁱ

In the late 1960s, "Malthus did suggest checking population growth through 'moral restraint' to combat what he called 'the excessive and irregular gratification of the human passions, his scepticism of the actual possibility of achieving such a 'moral' solution is also abundantly clear. Malthusian pessimism reflects his view of a natural conflict, but more importantly, the Malthusian focus itself represents a far-reaching abstraction from various social influences on hunger, starvation and mortality, making the food problem turns on the ratio of two physical magnitudes."ⁱⁱⁱ Malthusian understanding of food problem led to the 'Food Availability Decline' (FAD) argument. According to the Food Availability Decline understanding, people are food insecure because there is not enough food to consume. The Green Revolution in India primarily based on this understanding. The protagonists of the Green Revolution argued that all that matters is increased food production for the mitigation of hunger. The assumptions underlying Food Availability Decline argument has received a great deal of attention in those days. However, there are several questions which have to be answered by those holding this position. For example, have any country exceeded their carrying capacity? However, many disagree with the Malthusian understanding of food insecurity.

The 'Food Availability Decline' argument has naturally presented the impression that the world population has already been growing faster than the world food production. That is certainly not the case, on the other hand, there has been a steady rise in the amount of food harvest per head. According to the Sen, "Malthusian pessimism has not been well vindicated by history. His fears have proved to be not merely ill-founded but fundamentally misconceived, as the enormity of technical progress and the vast expansion of food production -far in excess of the growth of

population which has itself been very rapid - have shown in the span of nearly two centuries since the publication of Malthus's well-known essay."^{iv}

The Green Revolution approach based on the developments in the field of science and technology, especially in biotechnology, biochemistry, microbiology, advocates the transformation of agriculture as a massive productive exercise. The genetically modified high yielding seed varieties, double cropping, chemical fertiliser was extensively utilised to achieve large-scale production. Thus protagonists of the Green Revolution argued for massive production of foodgrains. The belief was that more food production means less hunger. Much attention is now being directed towards supporting modern biotechnology advances that impact directly on food security. The bio-solutions include support given to the development of micro nutrient-dense staples, and genetically modified foods such as wheat, maize, rice, beans and cassava that are rich in vitamin A, iron, iodine, and zinc.

The second stage revealed that despite the substantial growth in food supplies that had occurred at the global and national levels. Sen argues that making more food available is necessary, but not sufficient condition for food security. This was the period of Amartya Sen's significant work on poverty and famines and his elaboration of the 'entitlements approach' to the study of hunger. There were disagreements and counter-arguments over the issue of foodgrains scarcity. The central character of the Green Revolution with a focus on increasing food production and in fact, the surplus production could not overcome hunger and food insecurity. Because, it failed to alter the tightly concentrated economic power, in terms of land and other resources which play a crucial role in terms of purchasing power.

The people who do not have any land on which to cultivate or any other alternative source income to buy food go hungry no matter how much foodgrains available in the market. The narrow focus on the production ultimately ended as a futile exercise. According to Vandana Shiva, "Perhaps one of the most fallacious myths propagated by green revolution protagonists is the assertion that high yielding varieties (HYVs) have reduced the acre-age, therefore preserving millions of hectares of biodiversity. India's experience tells us that instead of more land being released for conservation, by destroying diversity and multiple uses of land, the industrial breeding system actually increases pressure on the land since each acre of a monoculture provides a single output and the displaced outputs have to be grown on additional acres"^v

It was argued that the purchasing power of the people plays a crucial role to secure food needs. Poverty is defined as a lack of access to food, clothing, shelter, education and health care. It essential that poverty is a cause of hunger; poor people are always chronically hungry. Unfortunately, the concern about hunger and malnutrition has led primarily to a concern about the prospect of food supply falling behind population growth. But over the past several decades,

food supply kept pace with the population in most areas of the world, and yet there was an increase in the incidence of hunger and malnutrition. What is already clear is that trends in the prevalence of hunger and starvation do not bear a one-to-one correspondence to the trends in per capita food supply. It is not merely an aggregate food supply but also its distribution that determines the incidence of hunger and malnutrition in any society.

In the high time of the Green Revolution, Amartya Sen's 'Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation' (1981) challenged the well-received theories of Malthus, and Food Availability Decline theory. Sen's 'Entitlement and Deprivation thesis got much attention in the world due to its powerful counterpoint on earlier theories on hunger. It is not because of Sen raised about hunger that no one had said before, but the way he approached the problem of hunger from a fundamentally new perspective, giving much emphasis on the capacity of an individual. The very disposition of the structure of ownership of food is only with entitlement relationship that every individual possesses as Amartya Sen termed 'Entitlements' of people.

Thus it contested the Green Revolution approach to tackle food insecurity. The recent growth in the field of biotechnology has opened up huge potential in the key areas of genomics, bioinformatics, molecular breeding, diagnostics and vaccine technology. Biotechnological research and development must result in improved yield potential and increased productivity. It could also lead to higher yields on marginal lands in countries that today cannot grow enough food to feed their people. Hunger and food insecurity is not a food production issue. Food insecurity occurs when people lack the opportunities to earn enough money to meet their basic needs.

According to Sen's 'Entitlement and Deprivation' (1981) thesis, hunger and food insecurity have to be seen as the characteristic of the people not having enough to eat food, and this does not equivalent to saying that there are not enough foodgrains to eat. The later could be the cause of the former, but it is not the only cause. According to Sen, "The problem may be illustrated with an example. The Bengal famine of 1943, which killed about three million people, was arguably the largest famine in this century, though there are also other claimants to that distinction. In terms of food availability per head, 1943 was not an exceptionally bad year, and indeed just two years earlier in 1941 the availability of food per person in Bengal had been a great deal less. if one were, to start with worried about food supply falling behind population, and then were to find out that the converse happened to be the case- with food supply outrunning population"^{vi}

The enormous growth in global food production and an increase in per capita availability of food are necessary but not sufficient conditions for eliminating hunger and malnutrition. However, aggregate availability is an essential condition for food security. The total food availability is insufficient to ensure either access to or proper utilisation of nutrients to achieve food security.

Food insecurity is inevitable within an economy lacking enough food to satisfy all of its population's nutritional needs, even if distributed perfectly equitably and without loss or waste. Ensuring adequate aggregate food availability has been, and remains today, a grave challenge in much of the low-income world. Despite global food surplus, underdeveloped countries suffer significant problems concerning food. Most social science and policy discussions of food security work with the food availability assumption that increased food supply is the key to reducing hunger. However, critics argue that increased food supply has little impact on hunger and starvation. According to them, deep-rooted inequality that causes hunger rather than inadequate food quantity.

Food availability in a region or a country does not depend on local production alone. No area or nation is a completely closed economy. Cross-regional and cross-border trade are indispensable parts of economic operations. There are often stocks of food grains that are carried over from one region to another, a decline in current local production does not, therefore, automatically imply a decrease in food availability. Even when there is a decline in food availability, the available food supply may still be adequate to feed the population of the region concerned. The correct conclusion to be drawn from this is that in the course of a crop failure, some people lose their access to food, and not that food as such becomes unavailable. To answer this question, one has to look into the conditions that decide the distribution and access to food in normal circumstances. Thus starvation may be caused not by food shortage but by the lack of income and purchasing power. As Sen explains; “A barber owns his labour power and some specialised skill, neither of which he can not eat, and he has to sell hairdressing service to earn an income to buy food. His entitlement to food may collapse even without any change in food availability if for any reason the demand for hairdressing collapses and if he fails to find another job or any social security benefit.”^{vii}

Based on the available data of food production, one can derive that while the aggregate food supply has kept pace with the population in most countries, its distribution has been getting progressively unequal. The question remains, why has the distribution of food been getting progressively unbalanced? In addressing hunger, one must steer clear from the debate while understanding the intimate link between the two. The causal relationship between hunger and poverty needs no reiteration. Everywhere poverty is accompanied by hunger, malnutrition, ill-health and illiteracy, among other problems. The third stage represents the period when food supply recognised as a concise element in determining food security and policies for it. Until recently, food security has focused on the production side of the food system and has called for sustainable agricultural production. Some scholars like Amartya Sen have recognised the limitations of this approach and recommended that included food production, distribution, preparation, preservation, consumption, recycling and disposal of waste, and support systems.

Sustainable agriculture can only be thriving to the extent that other parts of the food system and the rest of society also become more sustainable.

Policies directed towards global and national food supplies, while they remain necessary, are now deemed insufficient to cope with poverty, food insecurity, and chronic hunger, on the scale that they currently exist. Therefore, a more comprehensive range of policies must be formulated to address hunger and malnutrition. Policies must also address issues such as community access to sanitation, clean water supply, health facilities, and stemming cultural habits and practices, especially those that impact food preferences and food preparation. An approach with food security as an entry point to sustainable human development fully integrated into socio-economic measures. There is now a favourable policy environment and heightened public awareness regarding the centrality of hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition issues in state policy. While the goal of development is the reduction and elimination of poverty, policymakers have often overlooked the inherent relationship between poverty and food insecurity, their linkages and their repercussions.

ROLE OF DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL SYSTEM

In extending the political implications of public policy debates, democratic institutions and freedoms are significant in providing the conditions within which human development can be achieved. Evidence that public interest in ending hunger has grown in recent decades is reflected in responses to surveys, in pressures placed on legislators by their constituencies, and in the organised activities of lobbying groups, some of which are worldwide in scope, such as the civil society organisations.^{viii} However, neither the acceptance of the link between poverty and hunger nor the popular support for efforts to curb hunger can ensure that food aid will have its intended effects. The scholars like Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen have suggested that public pressure may be vital in shaping government policy and in enhancing the government's political will to engage in sound development. The existence of democratic rights and freedoms are crucial in maximizing human capacity. The crux of these debates is that public security and well being and protection against hunger and food insecurity more specifically, is closely bound up with the existence of electoral democracy and the civil and political freedoms. In Sen's words, "Insofar as public policy to combat hunger and starvation including rapid intervention against threatening famines may be depend on the existence and efficiency of political pressure groups to induce the governments to act, political freedom too may have a close connection with the distribution of relief and food to vulnerable groups."^{ix}

The politics of the particular society and its political system is fundamental in the elimination of hunger and poverty. Politics need to integrate into debates on poverty and food security. Lack of income is nearly always an immediate determinant of food insecurity, because food is generally

available in a given setting at some price, save extreme situations dictated by drought or famine. Chronic poverty often is cited as a source of food insecurity. The social organisation refers to the connectedness and functioning of institutional resources in a nation-state. Food and nutritional security are linked to the ability of people to acquire the necessary material or economic resources. Although land reforms are often cited as a solution to food security in India, the problem is more deeply rooted in patterns of inequality in power and access to human and material resources. Thus, policies that broaden access to opportunity and long-term resilience of livelihoods are central to food security and elimination of hunger. Political and economic policies of a political system and hunger are closely related and defects in public policy undermine food security. As a result, widespread hunger has harsh effects on the democratic system. When disorder or corruption disrupts institutional functioning, food security is at risk. Thus, hunger is a political problem and must be addressed through political change especially democratisation of distribution of resources.

Aristotle highlighted the close association between public well-being and the role of the state. Aristotle argued that all associations are formed with a view to promoting a good life, and the state is most sovereign among all associations best equipped to perform this role. Therefore institutions of the state have to make conscious effort to become socially responsible, recognising that the role and functions they perform inevitably have an impact on society. Since they have assumed a more significant role in broader governance issues of the nation, it is not possible for them to retiring away from assuming different types of responsibilities depending on the society in which they work. Providing food security and eliminating hunger are foremost among such responsibility. Hence it depends on the institutions of the state to determine policies for society. However, it will not be long-lasting unless the institutions get their act together and develop sound and sustainable policies to determine how they can contribute to eliminating social problems like food insecurity. In light of these facts, it becomes imperative to make an in-depth study of democratic politics, and its instrument public polices. The contradictions and the interrelations between politics and economy are the ultimate determinants of the development of society. Politics explains how the potential resources of a given society are mobilised and distributed through public policy. Most of the studies neglected politics and ideology in creating and alleviating hunger in society.

Why do hunger, food insecurity and poverty persist in a democratic society? The problem of hunger and food insecurity amidst plenty needs to be analysed from the perspective of Politics. Political thinkers Plato and Aristotle conceived politics as an art of understanding the problems of the society and science of solving the problems of society.^x Since politics is supreme science and politics administers and manages the entire society through its instrument public policy, what happens at the level of politics is an important question. Policy decisions are taken and

formulated by the political executive. Thus the politics play a significant role through the policy interventions and regulations in a given setup. What sort of politics is best suited to protecting the food security and well-being of the society? This question leads to the examination of a political system that operates in a particular society and form of government. The purpose of the state is the well being of its people. The state achieves its goals through the government and its public policies. The government is the instrument of the state through which the aims of the state are realised. The state formulates expresses and achieves its objectives through public policy and implements through the organs of government. This leads to a most crucial argument within the system and political process literature, the idea that political parties interact and bargain with the electorate, and thereby produce a particular policy outcome. Political parties can be individual, pursuing their power interests, or they can be collective (coalition) pursue mainly political interests. Policies are formulated by political compulsions, the interest of different pressure groups and different sections of society. Policy processes are naturally political, and this is because political parties stress interactions between people, mobilisation and pursuance of ideas and interests. There is nothing natural or automatic in a policy process, on the contrary, policy processes are social processes and the outcome cannot be established in advance but depends on the interactions and the strength of the pressure groups.

Whichever party is in power lack of political influence of those in the grip of food insecurity contributes to the persistence of food insecurity, this explains why imparting democratic rights can not ensure the right to food. People are not starving because there is not enough food to meet everybody needs, but, because they are unable to access food. Food insecurity and hunger is a result of the deficiency of institutional sanctions and democratic rights to access the available food. "Hunger and politics are also related in another fashion. Not only does lack of political will cause and perpetuate hunger, hunger can contribute to lack of political social and economic clouts to seek elimination of hunger. People who are in perpetual struggle to somehow eke out a living, find it difficult to be effective participants in decision making at the socio-political levels and influence policy making, affecting their lives"^{xi}

CONSTITUTION OF INDIA AND FOOD SECURITY

The Constitution of India does not explicitly recognise the fundamental right to food. However, Article 21 of the Constitution of India guarantees a fundamental right to life and personal liberty. The expression 'Life' in this Article means a life with human dignity and not mere survival or like animal existence. In the light of this, the State is obliged to provide for all those minimum requirements in order to enable a person to live with human dignities, such as education, health care, just and humane conditions of work, protection against exploitation etc. The Right to Food is inherent to a life with dignity, and Article 21 needs to be read along with Articles 39(a) and 47

to understand the nature of the obligations of the State in order to ensure the effective realisation of this right.^{xii} The citizen's right to be free from hunger enshrined in Article 21 is to be ensured by the fulfilment of the obligations of the State set out in Articles 39(a) and 47.^{xiii} The reading of Article 21 together with Articles 39(a) and 47, places the issue of food security in the correct perspective, thus making the Right to Food a guaranteed Fundamental Right which is enforceable by the constitutional remedy provided under Article 32 of the Constitution.^{xiv} Therefore it is the responsibility of the state to strengthen people's access to food. The state must fulfil the right whenever an individual or group is unable, for a reason beyond their control to enjoy the right to adequate food with the means at their disposal.^{xv}

One of the landmark development in the issue of hunger and starvation in India is People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) Public Interest Litigation (PIL) during the Golden Jubilee celebrations of the Constitution of India. In May 2001, the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) filed a landmark public interest petition in the Supreme Court, the case revealed that over 50 million tonnes of food grains were lying idle in the godowns of the Food Corporation of India (FCI), although there was widespread hunger in the country, especially in the drought-affected areas of Rajasthan and Orissa. Initially, the case was filed against the Government of India, the FCI, and six State governments. Subsequently, the list of respondents was extended to include all States and Union territories. The petition alleged that the State was negligent in providing food security. The petition also alleged that the Government's relief works were inadequate. The Supreme Court found that surplus food stocks were available and, at the same time, that deaths from starvation were occurring in several locations. Supreme Court issued an interim order directing the States to implement fully eight different centrally-sponsored schemes for food security and to introduce cooked mid-day meals in all Government and government-assisted schools. Since 2001, the Court has issued an interim order that has forced the Union and the State governments into action. The Supreme Court orders have directed the State governments to complete the identification of the beneficiaries of specific welfare programmes and to improve the implementation of food schemes and employment programmes. "The crux of this debate is that public security and well-being and protection against starvation more specifically, is tightly bound up with the existence of electoral democracy and the civil and political freedoms necessary to make this operational"^{xvi} As Amartya Sen claims that "famines do not occur in countries with democratic institutions."^{xvii}

In reality, deep-rooted democratic foundations and popular participation in the policy process appear to be more crucial than near electoral democracy. This indicates the powerlessness of the people and lack of participation in decision making, in terms of distribution and share rather than scarcity of food. Those who are going hungry are voiceless, and they do not have any share in the democratic process. They become mere objects of electoral politics at the time of elections once

in five years. Democratic control of the resource delivery system is the ultimate test of democracy. Institutions created to represent the will and the interests of the people have abandoned their social and political responsibilities.

The prevailing power structure, democratic rights, free press and mass media are mainly related to the structure and functioning of institutions in a society and have a critical role in mitigating or eliminating social problems like food insecurity. "Democratic theory, as interpreted by political thinkers like J.S. Mill, C.B McPherson, Len Doyal, Ian Gough and David Held, rests on the assumption that everyone is at least potentially a 'doer', an actor and a developer of her/his human capacities. For a person to exercise her human capacities to the full these must be under her own conscious control rather than dictate of another. This 'ability to act' or 'exercise one's capacities to the full' represent power on the part of the holder-providing the capacity to get the things done, or the capacity to 'produce effects' as power was understood...."^{xviii}

CONCLUSION

The severity of the crisis of equal distribution of food demonstrates the inadequacy of existing policies and the need to search for programmes that address the sustainability of food security. If democracy is about representing society in its whole, then there is a sheer inadequacy and lapses. Those who are going hunger or at least half hunger are voiceless and powerless. Hunger and starvation deaths are grave negligence on the part of the state. The eradication of hunger and achieving food security strengthen the prospects for the democratic political system as well. The plight of starving masses due to food insecurity implicitly provide the proof of failed policies and deficit of equal distribution. The state of affairs indicates the powerlessness of the people, starvation and hunger amidst overflowing food grains in government's warehouses indicates the scarcity of democracy rather than scarcity of food.

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- ^{xii} Article 39(a) of the Constitution, enunciated as one of the Directive Principles, fundamental in the governance of the country, requires the State to direct its policy towards securing that the citizens, men and women equally, have the right to an adequate means to livelihood
- ^{xiii} Article 47 spells out the duty of the State to raise the level of nutrition and the standard of living of its people as a primary responsibility.
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