

AN INVISIBLE HUMANITARIAN CRISIS IN INDIA

Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Issues Related to Poverty, Inclusion, Employment & Sustainable Development

India's labouring poor have largely disappeared even from the inner pages of newspapers and from television screens. It is as though, after the country has gradually unlocked and most migrants have returned home, the wrenching distress of mass hunger and sudden unemployment that racked their lives has somehow passed. The reality is entirely the reverse. The devastating impact of the unprecedented closure of the entire economy, which was already in recession, will endure for a long time. However, the immense suffering of the poor has been rendered invisible by the collective indifference of the state and the rich and middle classes.

On the banks of the Yamuna, adjacent to the largest cremation ground in Delhi, is an embankment called [Yamuna Pushta](#), home to 4,000 homeless men. In normal times, they survived by doing casual wage work, mostly in eateries or construction. Work was uncertain and always underpaid; still they managed to keep raw hunger at bay by eating food provided by religious food charities in gurdwaras, temples and dargahs. I met them recently. Their destitution and desperation were palpable. There is still no work, and shrines have still not adequately revived their food charities. The Delhi government has mostly ended its free cooked food distribution programme. At the peak of the programme, about 10 lakh people were being fed in over 1,000 centres. I was critical then of the indignity of forcing people to line up for hours each day for a ladle of food. But although it could have been organised with more compassion and respect, that was still a crucial public lifeline for people thrust suddenly into mass hunger. With that lifeline snapped, there is nothing except for some small private charities to shield them from the blistering winds of hunger.

Also read | [Lockdown protects the well-off, but what about those who face hunger, homelessness or poor health?](#)

My comrades, including those working with homeless people in other cities, activists of the right to food campaign countrywide, and volunteers for food relief of the [Karwan-e-Mohabbat](#), all report conditions of even more worrying precarity and deprivation from around the country. There are communities in the countryside — in forests, deserts, hills, river islands and Dalit ghettos — who even in normal times survived on the edge of hunger. They used to depend on remittances from migrants for their survival; today they have to feed the migrants who returned. Casual daily wage workers, weavers, artisans, home-based workers, rickshaw-pullers and street vendors have always lived precarious lives too. But they have slipped much deeper into want. And there are millions of new entrants into the ranks of the hungry, including laid-off employees of small enterprises and eateries, domestic workers, sex workers, workers in the gig economy, and even teachers in low-income private schools and those taking private tuitions.

All of these workers, and tens of millions more, are bracing themselves for the ways that the dispossessed have learnt, from time immemorial, and that are hardwired into their DNA, to live with chronic hunger. The first is to eliminate nutritious but unaffordable portions of one's diet, including dal, milk, vegetables, fruit, eggs and meat. Many families report that they are eating only coarse rice and roti with salt. The next step is to reduce food intake, cutting down on both the quantity eaten during each meal and the number of meals, teaching one's body to endure with less and less. As households slide further down this steep slope, there are increasing numbers of nights when they have to sleep hungry. Children who could earlier depend on the school or preschool centre for at least one nutritious meal are now being sent out to work, including scrabbling through waste for anything which can be eaten or sold.

A number of global reports warn that hundreds of millions of people are being thrust into extreme poverty and hunger because of the economic impacts of the lockdown and the raging pandemic. A United Nations University paper ([Precarity and the pandemic, June 2020](#)) estimates that 400 million new workers are at risk of slipping into extreme poverty, of less than \$1.90 a day. What is even more worrying is that “the location of global poverty is likely to shift towards middle-income countries and South Asia and East Asia.” The impact could intensify because of “pre-existing conditions of fragmented or insufficient social protection systems” and could last for “years to come”. The UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Philip Alston, similarly estimated in a study published in early July that more than 250 million people are at risk of acute hunger. This impact, he believes, “will be long-lasting”. He is critical of governments which “rather than acknowledging how badly the efforts to ‘end poverty’ have been faring, and how relentlessly the pandemic has exposed that fact... are doubling down on existing approaches that are clearly failing”. His angst about public policy failures to deal with the scale and depth of the humanitarian crisis is entirely justified. First, at senior levels of the Indian government, there is little acknowledgement of the depth of the crisis of hunger and the annihilation of livelihoods. To revive the economy and, in particular, MSMEs — the sector employing the most people outside agriculture — the Finance Minister relies mostly on credit rather than on fiscal transfers, unmindful that when both demand and production have crashed, credit will have few takers and can accomplish little.

Also read | [Fight against hunger disrupted by coronavirus-induced recession](#)

Second, governments also sought to revive the broken economy by excluding workers from regimes of labour rights protections, ostensibly for attracting capital investment. Instead of atoning for the immense distress of unprotected workers and mitigating future suffering by building sturdy legal walls for their protections, many State governments used the pandemic to further weaken the scant protections which the law currently provides informal workers. Some governments attempted to extend the workday to 12 hours, to suspend the protections of various labour laws for three years, and regulate the movement of workers across State borders.

Lockdown displaces lakhs of migrants

Even prior to the pandemic, India slipped to the 102nd position in the Global Hunger Report of 2019 that ranked 117 countries. It had fallen behind its neighbours Nepal, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The economy was also stuttering, with unemployment at a 45-year high. In the midst of this smouldering crisis, the most stringent lockdown in the world was imposed, nearly halting both demand and supply overnight. As the COVID-19 infection spreads to States with the most broken public health systems, such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, and with the homeless and the poor being excluded from highly privatised health facilities in cities, the problems of the poor will further exacerbate. As the virus ravages bodies enfeebled by hunger and distress, they remain abandoned by the state, with no reliable access to care.

Also read | [Global hunger could double due to COVID-19 blow, says UN](#)

Through all of this, the political establishment, the media and the middle class remain culpably indifferent, preoccupied instead with buying legislators and toppling governments; purchasing military aircraft; jailing dissenters; and divisive agendas like the triumphalist construction of a Ram temple at the site of a demolished medieval mosque. With millions slipping invisibly into chronic hunger and intense poverty, India is hurtling silently into its gravest humanitarian crisis in over half a century.

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