

## Hunger is a shame

It is sad that it required the publication of a report by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) to draw attention to a problem that has been present in India for centuries and is endemic in all developing countries: hunger. It is an undeniable fact that a significant proportion of the Indian population goes hungry on many days of the year. Why should the government deny this depressing fact, unless it has developed the habit of denying anything that is an inconvenient truth?

There is no mystery in the numbers put out by the IFPRI (see table):

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Year	India's rank/Number of countries	India's Index Score
2007	94/118	25.03
2008	98/120	23.7
2009	102/121	23.9
2010	105/122	24.1
2011	108/122	23.7
2012	106/120	22.9
2013	105/120	21.3
2014	99/120	17.8
2015	93/117	29.0
2016	97/118	28.5
2017	100/119	31.4

*A lower score means a better situation.*

*Rise in score is deterioration.*

Every year, some countries are added and some countries are dropped, presumably because of availability or non-availability of data. As the table shows, this is not a material factor - over 11 years, the total number of countries considered has varied between 117 and 122, which is, statistically, insignificant. What conclusions can we draw?

- India's relative rank among the countries deteriorated between 2008 and 2011 but the score was more or less the same;
- India's relative rank and score improved significantly between 2011 and 2014; and

– there has been a significant decline in the score since 2014.

## **The Good and the Bad**

The question that we have to ask ourselves is, why was India not able to maintain the trend of improvement that was witnessed up to 2014?

Every government since 1947 must be held responsible for the good and the bad, and so is the present government. The Global Hunger Index is calculated based on the proportion of the population that is undernourished; prevalence of wasting and stunting among children below the age of five; and the under-five mortality rate. There has been progress. Without burdening this column with numbers, the study of the period between 2006 and 2016 reveals that, as a proportion, stunting among children has declined; anaemia among women of reproductive age has declined; low birth weight has declined; exclusive breastfeeding has improved; but wasting among children has worsened. None of the states in India reached acceptable levels of wasting or underweight in 2016, based on the WHO cut-off rates for public health significance.

The reason for both the improvement and the deterioration is food - its availability, affordability and accessibility. People must have adequate food, everything else is secondary. India produces enough food for its people, but not all people get enough food to eat. That is the paradox. While many interventions were made - some achieved moderate success - the most decisive intervention was the passing of the National Food Security Act, 2013 (NFSA).

## **The NFSA Promise**

The NFSA declared 'entitlements' to food grains every month at subsidised prices. Every person in a 'priority household' will be entitled to 5 kg of food grain, every 'Antyodaya' household to 35 kg, every pregnant woman or lactating mother to a daily free meal during pregnancy and for six months after childbirth plus Rs 6,000, every child under six years to a daily free meal, every child between 6 and 14 years to a free mid-day meal, and, in the case of non-supply of foodgrains or meals, to a food security allowance. It was intended to cover, if necessary, up to 75 per cent of the rural population and up to 50 per cent of the urban population. A State Commission would oversee the implementation of the Act in each state.

The NFSA was a bold, ambitious and obviously costly intervention. Reservations were expressed; however, the only alternative was a Universal Basic Income (UBI) that may have proved more expensive.

## **Grave Neglect**

When the government changed in 2014, the NDA was obliged to implement the law. It did not. I cannot recall the Prime Minister making food security a mission (as he did Swachh Bharat), nor did the government propose an alternative. The NFSA was gravely neglected. In July 2017, the Supreme Court found that in many states the bodies charged with implementation had not been set up and described the situation as "pathetic". According to the Budget documents, the government spent Rs 134,919 crore in 2015-16 under the NFSA. For 2016-17, it was Rs 130,335 crore (budget estimate) and Rs 130,673 crore (revenue estimate), but the actual expenditure was only Rs 105,672, as reported in May 2017. This was callous neglect and there has been no explanation.

The State of Food Security and Nutrition Report (UNICEF, 2017) states that 190 million people in India are undernourished. When the IFPRI holds a mirror to our face, it is not enough to deny the warts. Hunger in India is an ugly wart. The government of the day owes an obligation - higher than

the promise of a bullet train or the 'tallest' statue or any other jumla - to propose a comprehensive solution to eliminate hunger and implement it.

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