

Hunger, Starvation and Aadhaar

It took the death of 11-year-old Santoshi Kumari from Jharkhand's Simdega district to remind the country that hunger and starvation of young children is still a reality in India. This was not the first such incident. Last month, three brothers in Karnataka also died under similar circumstances. The children died not only due to lack of food, but also because of the apathy of a government which has put all its effort in denying the story and framing flimsy excuses rather than addressing the issue.

It is also a grim reminder of the huge disconnect between India's relatively high levels of growth and its low ranks on human development. The Global Hunger Index (GHI) 2017 once again reminded that growth is necessary but not sufficient to deal with the millions of challenges that the poor face in their day-to-day lives. While we may quibble about the ranking, the methodology of comparing countries has remained consistent over time. And based on these, there is no denying the fact that India not only is home to the most number of malnourished in the world, but its progress in combating malnutrition has been slower than countries with similar level of income.

The index is based on a combination of calorie undernourishment (percentage of population below the recommended nutritional intake) and child wasting, stunting and being underweight. Brought out by the International Food Policy Research Institute, GHI has seen increasing coverage with more data being made available. By the latest GHI 2017, India ranks 100 out of 119 developing countries. It does not include most of the developed countries where the extent of hunger is insignificant. But among the countries for which information is available, India has seen the lowest improvement among all countries taken together for which information is available.

More than the level of hunger and malnutrition, it is the slow progress in resolving them despite the rapid growth of the economy which should put the policymakers to shame. While the index for India has improved from 38.2 in 2000 to 31.4 in 2017 declining by 6.8 points, most countries at a level of hunger and malnutrition similar or higher than India have seen a faster decline. During the same period, the corresponding decline for North Korea (12.1), Bangladesh (11.1), Nepal (14.8), Afghanistan (19.4), Ethiopia (23.7) and Rwanda (24.9) was almost double or more. One can add to the list many more countries which have achieved a much faster and better outcome despite growing slower than India.

The issue is not new nor has the attention to this been drawn for the first time. This was aptly described as a national shame by the previous prime minister. Since then, there has been a vibrant debate leading to passing of the National Food Security Act (NFSA). The Act which was to be implemented by July 2014 all over the country is still in the process of getting implemented in many states. In most states, either the identification of beneficiaries is not complete or even where it is complete, it is yet to be implemented fully. The maternity entitlement programme which is part of NFSA has been notified only recently, that too with lower entitlement than what was enacted.

But what killed the young children was not the lack of food or government schemes to tackle malnutrition. We have many of these and most have seen these being accessed by the poor despite bureaucratic obstructions. The responsibility of death lies with the overzealous administration which was more bothered about identifying ghost beneficiaries through the forced implementation of Aadhaar-led biometric identification than providing ration to those who need it. The political apathy is obvious from the approach itself which believes that the objective of public policy is making Aadhaar mandatory even though it is not. Such attitude has also been seen in other nutrition programmes such as mid-day meal scheme where young children in school have been denied nutritious food in the absence of Aadhaar identification. So has been the case in the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) where pregnant women have been denied benefits

legislated by Parliament in the absence of valid biometric identification. There is now enough evidence that there are errors of exclusion with Aadhaar, but also that the biometric identification is not fool-proof. This was the evidence from the east Godavari experience where it has been running for a long time but also elsewhere.

The administrative machinery is not only violating the NFSA, which has been enacted by Parliament but is also leading to a situation where needy households have been discouraged from accessing the basic services that is legitimately due to them. On every such instance, the official reaction has been one of denial rather than acknowledging the pitfalls of such bureaucratic adventures. The current instance of hunger and starvation deaths is a clear case of an insensitive administration using Aadhaar to deny benefits to the citizens. Above all, it is a clear reflection of the political priorities of the governments. For the government, life of a human being is certainly less important than a 12-digit number.

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