

# Hunger cannot wait

NEWS

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**W**hen news broke of the starvation deaths of 19 people in a remote village in Orissa, India, the knee-jerk reaction of the state and central governments was denial. The food godowns are stacked full, there is no question of any starvation and the deaths were caused by food poisoning. QED.

But the advantage of democracy is that the media does not swallow such official bilge. Soon enough, images of emaciated humans were flashed across television screens, with reports that they had nothing to eat but wild mushrooms (often poisonous) and mango kernels. Denial being no longer tenable, the state and central governments did the next best thing - blamed each other for mismanaged food-delivery.

There was outrage in the media at the inhumanity of wheat rotting in storage while people are starving to death. Yet, in the era of globalisation, it seems blasphemous to expect the government to drop everything and launch an emergency operation to transport the useless wheat from its stocks to the starving people. What would the IMF-WB and WTO say? Subsidies are sinful. Free food? Perish the thought. What would it do to the sacred market forces? And, the already bloated non-development expenditure? And, the budget-deficit?

So, a huge wrangle was on between New Delhi, state governments and the local officials about who was responsible for how much rip-off and where. And, why the food-for-work programme was not reaching the affected people, or the latter not turning for food and work. Fittingly, therefore, the Orissa chief minister was pelted with mango kernels during his belated visit to the ravaged area!

However, the coexistence of food surpluses and hunger is an old and universal phenomenon. In medieval times, delayed information and slow transportation were possible excuses. These no longer hold, but still the phenomenon persists. Dr Amartya Sen, India's noble laureate, has shown that most famines occurred not because food was scarce but because the people were too poor to buy it. This is precisely what is happening in India.

How much better off can Pakistan be? We too have had surplus harvests, and state godowns are overflowing as export markets remain elusive. Do we also have starvation?

Our media not being anywhere near as inquisitive as their Indian counterparts, we can-

adults should be going hungry?

But these are official figures. Other estimates put the incidence of poverty and hunger much higher. This quibbling aside, increasing poverty and hunger are palpable sub-continental realities. Poverty-driven suicides, with even little children falling prey to their parents' desperation, are bitter daily reminders of that.

By 2011, the perspective plan unfolded last week aims to reduce child-malnutrition to 20 percent and "food poverty" to 15 percent. Let us assume that Uncle Sam will not have the international moneylenders pull the plug, and all official dreams will come true. Even so, by the official reckoning, 19 percent (over 28 million) Pakistani children and 15 percent (over 22 million) adults will still be hungry after ten years. The actual numbers, both of the "food poor" and the "other poor," are likely to be much higher.

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Thus, given the gross inadequacy of the fight against the twin evils, both hunger and poverty seem here to stay. Naturally, India and Pakistan can divert funds from their crushing defence budgets to fighting poverty. That should speed things up significantly. But, unfortunately, the well-fed decision-makers have only heard of poverty. They cannot even begin to imagine what it really is, and what terrible havoc it wreaks.

\* Poverty is another name for disgrace, dependence and being hated and scorned on seeking help - as if we are the children of some other god.

\* Why do you ask me? Poverty is visible from every brick of my house - the broken utensils, tattered clothes, lifeless eyes of the children and the flickering, jaundiced face of my wife.

\* Poverty is determined the day we are born. The poor cannot beget the rich, and the rich do not beget the poor.

\* Morning, afternoon, evening - never have I had all three meals. When I see animals sitting on the garbage dump, the pangs of my hunger ignite.

\* Poverty is the fear of the future. What if the two crumbs of bread available today are not there tomorrow?

\* Should I arrange food, or medicine for the sick child or pay the house-rent? Enduring these agonising decisions every day is poverty.

\* We have no land or any skill. What else is poverty?

\* I want to study. I love books, I like paper and pen. But my father doesn't understand these things. Perhaps that's why we're poor.

\* Electricity, road, school, hospital we have not even thought about. We only need clean water and a few morsels of bread.

\* Poverty is the ultimate loss of hope, where the hunger and disease-ravaged person prays for the solace of death.

\* Poverty robs you of self-respect, even honour. My daughter is hungry for many days. How can I tell her to keep her gaze lowered?

\* The high-caste people do not even shake hands with the Kammi Kameens. This gulf is called poverty.

\* My husband bears the landlord's invective all day long. Seems to me that the landlord's fury and his shoe beating is poverty.

\* Whenever some one looks at me with contempt and calls me Karmali instead of Karam Ali, I realise that I am poor.

\* The police took away my son for no reason. He returned after three days, with a battered body and blood-soaked clothes. I knew then that we were poor, and fated for nothing else but enduring tyranny.

\* The footprints of my poverty and deprivation lead straight to the Chaudhry's house. The splendour of his lofty house is the cause of my poverty.

\* To understand poverty, go to the rich and ask them how they have become so rich?

\* I'm the daughter of an ill-fated and helpless tiller. The Chaudhry has dishonoured me repeatedly. My father, brother, the village Moulvi and many others know of this cruelty

quisitive as their Indian counterparts, we cannot be sure. But most signs lead to the worrying conclusion that, while they may not actually be dying yet, too many people are certainly short of food. We are, please recall, ranked an abysmal 135 in the UN's Human Development report. And the government's 10-year perspective plan reminds us that growth has plummeted to 2.6 percent (to India's downscaled 4.5 to 5.7 percent), population is booming at 2.17 percent, debt is a crippling 103.6 percent of the GDP, exports are stuck-in-the-mud and (official) unemployment is 10.4 percent.

The cumulative human toll is reflected in child-malnutrition (read: starvation and stunted growth) at a criminal 39 percent and hunger at 30 percent (for the latter, the official euphemism is "food poverty"). One apparent anomaly is that if 39 percent children are starving, surely more than 30 percent

There would indeed be much more urgency and honesty in their exertions if the rulers (and the rich) could, by a miracle, experience the sufferers' side of poverty and live through its dehumanising effects. That, sadly, not being possible, we have to use second-hand accounts to sensitise them to the poignancy of poverty.

In his moving and insightful travelogue, *Gautam Kay Des Main*, Dr Amjad Saqib (presently of the Punjab Rural Support Programme) confronts us with the guilt of not really knowing what poverty is despite seeing, and talking about, it all the time. He then takes us into the lampless hovels of the poor, and asks them to describe poverty. The response is devastating. While pondering these replies, please conjure up also their defeated faces and decrepit environs:

repeatedly. My father, brother, the village Moulvi and many others know of this cruelty. But no one raises a voice. If the loss of my honour is not poverty, this apathy certainly is.

This utter helplessness can test one's faith. Can we imagine these Pakistanis being enthused by quotes from the Quaid, or the militaristic patriotism turned on by the official media on Defence Day? How many of them would even know where and why the line is drawn, or who fights whom and why?

Surely, the most compelling national imperative is eradicating poverty. And, yes, there is a magic wand to do it with. Sinful official grandeur must go, defence has now to give way and debt has to wait because poverty, hunger, ill health and illiteracy will not. Nothing less than a focused and emergency action will help.

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