

# The Battle Against Hunger

by Harsh Mander

In India, large-scale famines are now part of history. However, the battle against hunger has not been won. One in every two children in India remains malnourished, and two in three women are anaemic. Many families in both villages and towns continue to struggle with hunger, which is for them a way of life.

These families are essentially from the unorganised sector, such as landless workers and artisans, socially oppressed groups like Dalits and adivasis, households headed by single women, persons with disabilities, old people without care-givers, migrant workers and urban street children.

In many homes, and on the streets, people continue to sleep hungry, and within most families, women are the last to eat, and if food is scarce, they are likely to eat the least.

Such a situation is intolerable, because children and women even in countries poorer than India have significantly better health and nutrition. India has masses of foodgrain, more than it can store, and even exports subsidised food, which is mostly fed to cattle overseas, while millions of its own citizens remain chronically hungry. The problem is no longer of absolute food shortage, but of bad distribution and poor governance.

We are today confronted with an unconscionable situation of rampant hunger and recurring droughts, on the one hand, and governments that fail to prevent hunger although they have the means to do, on the other. Therefore, in the year 2001, a group of activists under the banner of the People's Union for Civil Liberties filed a case in the Supreme Court, demanding that the right to food should be recognized as a legal right of every person in the country, whether woman or man, girl or boy.

If the government fails in ensuring this right, people should have the right to take their government to court. The highest court of the land has passed a number of important orders to advance the people's legal right to food. However, even though these legal rights have been created, they will be sustainably realized only by people's action.

The most significant legal rights to food that have been created by the Supreme Court are that every school-going child in the country is now entitled to a nutritious hot cooked meal at state expense. Every infant and child below the age of 6 years, every expectant and nursing mother and every adolescent girl is entitled to appropriate supplementary nutrition. The creation of these legal entitlements for millions of undernourished children and women, have forced the central and state governments to make quantum leaps in budgetary allocations to reverse rampant malnutrition.

The unfinished agenda of the courts includes creating similar entitlements for every child, including the street child. Similarly, the food denials of all women (not just mothers) need to be addressed. The courts need to ensure the coverage of aged and disabled people who have no care-givers.

However, dispossessed families that live with hunger have able-bodied adult members who are capable of sustaining themselves and their families through work. But landlessness, caste discrimination, mechanisation of agriculture, the slow death of handlooms and traditional crafts and the merciless logic of globalised economic growth have rendered increasing numbers of poor rural households in the informal sector desperately and

chronically unemployed. To combat the sapping indignity and inhumanity of hunger in their homes and bellies, they do not seek charity or welfare transfers from the state. All they seek is work.

In times when the state is attempting to drastically minimize its role, the battle against hunger cannot be won by mere appeals and assurances of work. There are a number of state schemes that already assure employment to the rural poor.

But studies have established that all these schemes together can provide no more than a paltry eight days of work a year to every rural impoverished adult. It is evident that people living with hunger cannot fill their stomachs merely on such assurances made by uncaring governments. Their only hope is an iron-cast legally enforceable guarantee. It is this that the employment guarantee programme currently on the anvil of Parliament seeks to achieve. In the history of state efforts to combat and reverse rural poverty, it is potentially the most significant step after land reforms. In the shrill opposition that has been mounted against the bill, the most influential critique is that as a country we simply cannot afford it. The sceptre has been raised of additional tax burdens, alarming the middle classes.

However, the problem is not of absolute shortage of fiscal means, but of our nation's priorities. It is long overdue that a national consensus be developed that the first claim on the state's resources must be to ensure that no citizen lives without food, or shelter, or basic education, or health care, or work. India's tax to GDP ratio is only 9 percent, which is lower than most countries, so there is considerable untapped scope for further taxation of the wealthy. The other major criticism that the bill has attracted is that much of the resources will be diverted in corruption. The evidence from the field is that more problems arise from poor management by government like late disbursement of funds, than from leakages. It is also ironic that the same argument is not raised against defence purchases or the construction of urban infrastructure, in which levels of fraud dwarf most rural scandals. The answer is greater transparency and citizen power, through legislation like the right to information, and greater organised citizen vigilance, against all forms of corruption, rather than a selective veto only of those government expenditures that benefit the most impoverished citizens.

The proposed act, combined with committed state and citizen action, carries the potential of reversing hunger in every rural household where adults can work. The challenges will remain of finding work that is suitable for persons with disabilities, artisans, or single women who head households. Even more daunting will be combating hunger and unemployment in cities. But if we so resolve, with the entitlements that this act will guarantee, we can be closer than ever before to the dream of banishing hunger from every home in our land.