

## Hunger and Poverty\*

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The Global Hunger Index (GHI) for 2022 has just come out, which shows India occupying the 107th position among the 121 countries for which the index is prepared (countries where hunger is not a noteworthy problem are left out of the index). India's score on the hunger index is 29.1 which is worse than the score of 28.2 it had in 2014. (The lower the figure the less is hunger). One is so bombarded these days by official talk about India being among the fastest-growing economies of the world, India within sight of becoming a \$5 trillion economy, and India being an emerging economic power, that news such as the GHI brings one down to earth. Ironically, the only country in South Asia that is below India on the hunger index, and that too only marginally, is war-ravaged Afghanistan (rank 109); the rank of crisis-hit Sri Lanka is 64, of Nepal 81, of Bangladesh 84 and of Pakistan 99.

The GHI news however should come as no surprise. The fact that hunger in the country is acute and growing, has been pointed out by several scholars. They have used data on per capita daily calorie intake, and per capita annual foodgrain availability to make this point. And they have argued that since growing hunger is a symptom of growing poverty, a proposition that the Planning Commission had originally accepted, the period of neo-liberalism which has seen secularly growing hunger culminating in this year's GHI, despite the much lauded high GDP growth, must also be a period of growing absolute poverty.

The evidence on secularly growing hunger in the neo-liberal period is quite overwhelming. If we take 1993-94 and 2011-12, the first an NSS "large sample" year closest to the beginning of neo-liberalism, and the second the last NSS "large sample" year for which data have been released by the government, we find that the proportion of the population below 2200 calories per person per day in rural India increased from 58 to 68 per cent; the corresponding figures for urban India where the benchmark was 2100 calories per person per day increased from 57 to 65 per cent. The figures for 2017-18, another NSS "large sample" year, were apparently so appalling that the government decided to suppress them altogether, and even to discontinue the NSS in the old form. But leaked data show that per capita real expenditure for rural India as a whole had fallen by 9 per cent between 2011-12 and 2017-18.

There is however a powerful view among many researchers that this apparently growing incidence of hunger should not be taken as evidence of people becoming worse off over time. There are two strands of this argument. One states that because of pervasive mechanisation, the drudgery of manual work has declined over time, so that working people these days do not need as many calories as they used to earlier. They spend less on food than they used to, and diversify their spending towards other ends. The second strand does not mention the decline in the extent of arduous work, but simply states that people are voluntarily diversifying their expenditure away from such elementary goods as foodgrains, towards both more refined and sophisticated food items, and also towards other commodities like children's education and proper healthcare.

On both these counts according to them, the decline in per capita foodgrain absorption is symptomatic not of a worsening living standard as of an improvement in living standard; hence to draw conclusions about growing poverty from what appears at first sight as growing hunger (but in fact is a voluntary reduction of foodgrain consumption as part of a better life), is entirely illegitimate. The incidence of poverty, it follows, is not growing but declining, as the government and the World Bank have been claiming (though the latter has recently talked of a rise in poverty during the pandemic).

To repeat, there is no dispute about the decline in per capita foodgrain consumption in India, taking both direct and indirect consumption together, the latter through processed foods and animal feeds; nor is there any dispute about the decline in per capita calorie intake. The real difference is whether this signifies growing poverty or a diversification of consumption away from foodgrains that is symptomatic of a fall in poverty. The fact that an increase in poverty would cause greater hunger is not in doubt; the point is whether the reverse is true, whether reduced ingestion of foodgrains can be taken as proof of growing poverty. The Global Hunger Index becomes useful here.

If reduced food intake was indeed a symptom of an improvement in the condition of life, then we should be expecting many more countries whose growth-rates appear impressive to join India at the bottom of the GHI table. But the countries in India's neighbourhood on the GHI table, where our rank is 107, are Rwanda (rank 102), Nigeria (103), Ethiopia (104), Republic of Congo (105), Sudan (106), Zambia (108), Afghanistan (109) and Timor-Leste (110). All these are countries that are generally regarded as poor countries, so that their being at the bottom of the table is no surprise. By contrast, countries with which we would like our economic performance to be compared, such as China, are at the top of the table. China appears within the top 17 countries which are collectively, rather than individually, ranked. Its GHI score of less than 5 is way better than India's 29.1.

The fact that not a single one of the so-called high-growth economies figures alongside India underscores the complete vacuity of the arguments that emphasize a change in tastes (greater keenness for children's education) or a reduction in "drudgery" (through mechanisation) as being responsible for a (voluntary) reduction in foodgrain consumption. The reduction in "drudgery" owing to mechanisation, or the desire for children's education, are not characteristics specific to the Indian people; they are universal phenomena. Then why should India alone among the high-growth economies figure near the bottom of the GHI table?

It may be argued that while the desire for children's education and proper healthcare may be common to people everywhere, in India these are expensive services while in China they may be cheaper. Because of this, parents in India enrolling their children in the more expensive schools may have to cut back on their food consumption, while in China schooling being less expensive, there is no need to cut back on food intake for educating children.

But that is precisely our point, and it has nothing to do with any "change of taste". Everywhere, parents are keen on their children's education, but if in a particular country putting them to school requires having to forego food, then this foregoing is symptomatic of an increase in poverty. It indicates an increase in the price of one of

the goods in the basket consumed by the people, and hence an increase in the cost of living which is not accompanied by a corresponding increase in money incomes, and leads to a cut in foodgrain consumption. This cut in foodgrain consumption, which means an increase in hunger, is therefore a reflection of a rise in cost of living and hence of a reduced real income; and that exactly is what one means by an increase in poverty.

Put differently, any increase in real income must mean some increase in the consumption of every good in a basket of goods on which this income is spent (or some substitute good for one of these goods). An increase in real income, as cross-section data within India and across countries show, invariably means a rise in foodgrains consumption, not direct consumption alone but direct and indirect consumption taken together. But if there is a decline in the total direct and indirect foodgrain intake, as has been the case in India, then that must mean a decline in real incomes of the majority of the people, and hence a rise in poverty. The link between growing hunger and growing poverty therefore remains valid.

The reason why poverty according to official and World Bank estimates appears to have declined in India, on the basis of which it is claimed that the link between poverty and hunger no longer holds, is because they use a “poverty line”, a particular level of per capita money expenditure below which people are considered poor, which is updated by using a cost-of-living index. But the index as constructed in India does not reckon with the rise in cost of living owing to the privatisation of services like education and health. Therefore the true rise in cost of living is not taken into account, and the poverty line that is updated by using it, keeps falling below what it should have been. This underestimates the magnitude of poverty and the elite laps up this estimated, supposedly-declining, poverty ratio. The Global Hunger Index exposes the falsity of such poverty estimates.

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