

## **Fasting in the Midst of Prosperity : The Hunger among Urban Workers**

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*The workers of urban areas suffer due to sudden lockdowns which has become a common phenomenon due to pandemic. They mostly constitute migrants who are deprived of all sorts of state support. In such a scenario it is hard for them to meet even the bare necessities of daily life. However, most of the national dailies and electronic media have started to broadcast debates about the condition of the Indian economy and how that can be revived. The economy of the nations is dominating the imagination of the authorities. The economic health of the country is linked to welfare. However, the lost income sources and chronic hunger due to pandemic among the urban poor have not received adequate attention. Urban hunger is often overlooked. Hunger is largely construed as an urban phenomenon despite increasing poverty in urban areas. It was in the post-liberalization period the rural-urban migration gained momentum. The urban-rural migration pulled rural poor to urban areas in expectation of better livelihood. For many, a pandemic is very scary whereas hunger threatens the poor urban workers during the pandemic induced lockdowns.*

[**Keywords** : Prosperity, Poverty, Hunger, Lockdown, Urban workers]

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## **1. Introduction**

The urban migrant populations' contribution to the building of bustling cities is well recognized internationally (World Economic Forum, 2017). But migrant social-welfare is a negligible area in the social sciences research in India. They contribute to the overall development of urban areas and everyday living of the urban households. The complete household is said to be the one in possession of a housemaid who are overwhelmingly women. The insecurity of their employment is a major contributor to their sufferings. Such workers once deprived of employment faint for themselves due to conspicuous absence of state social security. The proposal of the Central Government regarding 'One Nation One Card' may contribute a great deal in reducing hunger among such populations.

The government interventions to promote welfare of informal sector labourers are inadequate and existing interventions have failed to make a serious dent on hunger and poverty. This sector of society deserves serious attention to reversing the severity of the problems, reluctant and political abulia in responding to it will prove to be acarpous. They work in small and big business farms but with job loss all their dashing hopes of a better life abruptly came crashing down. Accumulated marginalization of the poor in India earns opprobrious epithet internationally and absolute deprivation of many internally. Disappearance of public debate on hunger and poverty does not signify the absence of the same.

## **2. Alleviation of Poverty and Hunger**

It is a time of increase in poverty and hunger on an unprecedented scale due to the devastating economic impacts of the lockdown as the economy has been put into hibernation. Countries around the world are putting human lives ahead of the economy. However, all countries must ensure that the "health pandemic" does not transform into a "hunger pandemic". The massive increase in global poverty and hunger has renewed academic interest on the subject and why the countries around the globe must take them seriously. Food is the most basic necessity. It would not be iconoclastic to say that hunger in India is a perennial juggernaut. India has the unenviable record of being home to a third of the world's poor. India must act to stop the health crisis turning into a

food crisis by prioritizing access to food and aid to the poor. India is in an advantageous position because there is still plenty of food available under the public food stock of the Food Corporation of India (FCI) and in the open market. Food prices invariably fluctuate at the best of time making it harder for some to afford them.

The whole of human development “has been a bitter struggle against scarcity”, asserts Jean-Paul Sartre. Food is the important ingredient without which the human nerve stops functioning. Famines have ravaged human civilizations in different periods of time in the past. Food has shaped the world’s civilization. The food, economics, agriculture, and human empires are all strands of the same narratives. When many live hand-to-mouth without saving any disruption to the sources of income bound to have deleterious effects on their livelihood. The income-based households move above the poverty line until they continue to earn an income but in case of disruption shocks, they fall below poverty line (Krishna, 2003).

Hunger, poverty estimation, and approaches to attack them are debatable subjects in India. These debates are happening around certain pertinent issues but in Indian cases these debates have unique facets. They are governed by empirically-robust, sometimes ideologically matured and overloaded enriching skirmishes represented by towering economists on each side. The civil society groups and non-party political processes in India stand at a distance from most of these debates on Indian poverty and hunger. Many scholars blame the state withdrawal from the social sector, neo-liberal economic policies, free trade and subservient agriculture, to be the main culprit behind hunger, poverty and privation in India (Swaminathan, 2000; Patnaik, 2007). Narrow nature of the ruling alliance prioritizes economic growth over social sector development giving rise to an alarming rate of inequality and limited impact of economic growth on poverty alleviation and hunger (Kohli, 2012).

Pervasive hunger is a gigantic issue, recognition of the problems and its diagnosis can help India overcome the former because India possesses capabilities at present to solve its gigantic hunger problem. Many decades of democratic intervention have not made any serious dent on ending poverty and hunger. In India poverty and hunger are closely embedded with Indian social reality. The first Backward Classes Commission in 1953 acknowledged that low position in the caste hierarchy is the key determinant of social

and economic backwardness (Guru and Chakravarty, 2009 : 135-160). Policies to remove poverty and hunger like other problems arise from fundamental beliefs embedded in culture rather than from economic conditions. The child labour, for instance, is not due to economic conditions rather it depends on how wider society at large value them (Weiner, 1991).

Another theoretically and methodologically seminal work argues that the eradication of poverty in a democratic framework can be accomplished by a well organized and left-of-centre regime (Kohli, 1987 : 9). Most of the scholars with a staunch faith in pro-capitalist and neo-liberal economic systems argue that economic growth will gradually percolate down to the poorest sections and help in hunger and poverty alleviation. It supports a development model which believes that “economic development must precede alleviation of hunger and poverty”. Over two and half decades of higher rate of economic growth in India has not been able to make any serious dent on poverty and hunger. It has been beneficial for some and disadvantageous for many. The benefits of economic liberalization and higher rate of economic growth in India is centered in and around urban cities and unevenly distributed across the country. Indian problem and hunger is a problem amid plenty and not due to paucity of resources.

Social welfare is achievable with low levels of economic development as had happened in most countries of South-East Asia where social sector developments preceded economic development and economic liberalization, particularly in areas such as literacy, hunger, and poverty. India has the capabilities now to alleviate hunger and poverty. What it lacks is a collective endeavor, political will and commitments. In some Indian states, welfare activities have become synonymous with interest aggrandizement of political parties or political leaders. Decoupling welfare and populism in India is an arduous task because whatever welfare has been achieved in the past in India has mostly been achieved through the route of populism. South Indian states have remarkable expansion of welfare activities and have achieved comparatively commendable social welfare than the north Indian states. What matters most in welfare promotion is political focus and leadership with allocation of adequate resources. The ultimate prerequisite for welfare promotion is to spend more to achieve more welfare.

The empowerment of deprived sections depends on the welfare spending of different governments on their overall human development. According to some studies politics play an important role in reducing human suffering i.e. inputs in the health system, and output in the form of reduction of human misery and shows what happens when groups and segments of the population have little political power. In Indian policy making circle income poverty undermines other multifaceted nature of human deprivation. While addressing the problem of poverty and hunger we must acknowledge and accommodate the understanding of other major sources of human misery. If there is widespread illiteracy, the poor will become politically powerless.

The effective “community participation” and “associational network of discrete groups” are empirically verifiable contributors to effective policy implementation (Putnam, et al, 1993). The richness of “civic culture” contributes to having strong bonds among individuals, promoting the sense of collective well-being, and widening faith in the institutions of the democratic state, enriching democratic consolidation. Similarly, the correlation between “the culture and public action” is well-recognized.

The roles of the community or what a community thinks create decisive impacts on the policies and programmes implementation. Success of public policy implementation during public health emergencies like the present one requires resilient community participation without which the state agencies will be handicapped in combating pandemic. Previously the health care system was focused around health care staff and infrastructure. The focus has shifted to the communities at present. The success of health services is bound together with a complex web of interdependence of state agencies, bureaucracy, communities, civil societies etc. Information communication technology (ICT) are playing a paramount role in current public service delivery mechanisms leaving lesser scope for siphoning-off public funds meant for intended beneficiaries. Hence, pumping money and policy interventions can succeed in targeting problems and in solving them. New generations of bureaucrats are comfortable to work with innovative ICT and respond to emergency situations like the present one. Bureaucratic culture changes and changes in the long run but what directions it follows matters to all of us.

Sufficient empirical experiences are available to suggest that habitually state agencies do not even accept that individuals can die due to starvation as had happened in the case of Jharkhand and Odisha in the past. Lackadaisical attitudes of state agencies and bureaucracy in particular in responding to disaster like situations are not new. The colonial administration had synonymous attitudes in responding to emergency situations like famine and hunger caused by droughts and shortage of food grains in many cases (Currie, 2000).

Whether Indian government can alleviate hunger and poverty has many things to do with how Indian society at large values the concept of hunger and poverty. India has enough capability to deal with the problems of hunger but has to amass inspiration, political will and commitment to do so. Despite decades of accumulated electoral fatigue among Indian citizens they vote and elect those political leaders who promise 'removing poverty' and 'corruption' from Indian soil. Nonetheless capturing political power with such promises has become a routine thing in Indian politics. In India the approach of 'inequality aiming as income inequality' will not hold ground because the roots of hunger and poverty in India are mired in both eternity and ephemerality.

The pandemic lockdown has created hunger which is ephemeral in nature but it is linked to multiple external sources of deprivation. Today's hunger is linked to asset dispossession, lack of productive wealth, lack of savings, uncertain income and expenses particularly among the urban poor. In the last few weeks millions of labourers have been rendered jobless even in advanced capitalist democracies. Even in the strong and developed economies in the world not many families have emergency savings to stave off a situation like the one we are confronting worldwide.

Most live hand-to-mouth and sudden disruptions to existing sources of living aggravate their fragile and uncertain incomes. In the present scenario, any deterioration to their sufferings would be inhumane and will question the moral claims and very legitimacy of our democratic system about which we boast internationally. Most of the manual workers in Indian rural villages work in agriculture where their living conditions are invariably connected to developments in rural economy and local social power structure. They lack agenda setting power because they are the least unionized workers in the world. The population of small, marginal farmers and landless

constitute a significant majority in rural India. Years of stagnation in agriculture, monsoon dependent-single crop, negligence in the ascendance of neo-liberal policies which meant cutting subsidies and chronic low wage forced many of them to migrate seasonally, cyclically as well as permanently to urban cities in search of a fertile living. They work as casual labourers in a precarious state of hunger and poverty. Their chronic indefatigable efforts at improving their living standards without state support for long must be complemented through quick intervention as a responsibility of the state at this time of their livelihood's peripety.

### **3. Lockdowns and Ghettoisation of Hungry Workers**

Intolerable conditions aggravated further in lockdown and they were treated by different agencies as if they were the pandemic. What is startling and egregious is the manner in which the stranded labourers were treated as they could not go to their native places due to sudden imposition of lockdown creating gargantuan discommodation about their future. Due to abrupt closure of all means of commutation many took to foot slogging, some cycled over thousand kilometers to reach their native places. Some reportedly died on the way after walking for many days with family and media is reporting about the starvation deaths due to lockdown. It is an everyday struggle for these workers in the informal sector. Their contributions to the cities are highly underestimated and blamed for all sorts of evil-happening. Many consider them synonymous with all urban problems due to lack of their knowledge about labourers. For some the disheveled appearances of labourers annoy them.

Migrant labourers are invariable victims of different forms of jingoism, hatred and violence. They are attacked in different cities due to regional chauvinistic politics in the name of protecting opportunities for the so-called "locals". The quarantine is not a new concept in the urban living culture in many ways. The "gated communities" have expanded and attracted the middle class which practice quarantine in everyday living. The "gated communities" with security guards at the gate have become a matter of prestige for the middle and upper middle classes. It separates the "quarantined" from the "other fearsome". The new form of exclusionary spaces has expanded which prefer quarantine living and maintain distance from "dangerous others". The gated community and quarantine

living have aggravated the plight of the daily wagers and domestic maids in particular. The “quarantined” lack understanding about the so-called “dangerous others” because of the real “social distancing” they practice every day. The “social distancing” is embedded with “gated community” unlike the “physical distancing” the COVID-19 has encouraged. The gated communities have become a hallmark of urban and modern living. Unlike rural caste-clustered living they are socially plural but economically somewhat synonymous and new forms of socially exclusionary practices have blatantly expanded which dehumanizes the “dangerous others”. Besides the exploitation by market forces the labourers suffer from multitude of disadvantages in everyday life (Breman, 2010). The self-esteem of the informal sector workers has been subjected to severe hardship creating disenchantment against the government.

The majority among the informal sector labourers are women where payment norms are guided by patriarchal and other sociological norms. According to NSSO (2011-12) the women constitute the majority of the agriculture and farm workers. The informal sector works are manufacturing works and they have suffered due to lockdown and the women workers who are mostly low-paid and casual workers have been laid off. The lockdown has sparked worries of the phenomenal decrease in the women participation in outdoor economic activities. This will increase unemployment figures and weaken the economic backbone of millions of households. According to some estimates close to “120 million people have been rendered jobless in one month of lockdown” what is worrisome is that “out of 406 million people employed, 324.8 million people are either daily wager, self-employed or small farmers”. Recognizing the size and significance of informality of labour in Government of India has introduced multiple legislative measures such as the Unorganized Workers’ Social Security Act 2008, Contract Labour (Abolition & Regulation) Act 1970, and Workers’ Welfare Boards to stop their living conditions from worsening. Lack of accurate data on its size, creates confusion, misunderstanding and neglect of the sector. The growing informality of labour requires attention to stop it from interminable uncertainties. Some have improved their economic positions but many are struggling to meet basic necessities. Some in this sector have a reasonable income in normal times but many are casual labourers.

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) was enacted to provide safeguard to poor households during crises like the present one. MGNREGA was supposed to be one of the biggest schemes since independence to uproot poverty and hunger from Indian soil but the manner in which different states implemented this scheme suggested that the governments are not serious in reality to remove poverty and hunger. Some states did better; some did it reasonably well then other states. Some states did well in the implementation of MGNREGA in terms of the national average. A handful of states outperformed the majority of states so far as the effective implementation of worlds' largest employment schemes is concerned. There is considerable scope for improving the implementation of the scheme provided there is political will and support from the highest political leadership of the state governments and the top leadership at the Centre with reasonable allocation of money for the scheme. The lackadaisical implementation of the scheme suggests that the ruling elites across India are not serious about poverty alleviation.

Even when the UPA government was there at the Centre many decisions were taken to strengthen the operational capabilities of the scheme to implement them without much challenges at the grassroots. The reverse migration of the workers from towns and cities to the villages created challenges for the state governments. Through MGNREGA the states could create employment for the jobless. This is how states could transfer cash into the hands of daily wagers to reduce their sufferings. The Centre and States can come together to alleviate poverty and empower the poor through such revolutionary schemes.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The new waves of hunger and poverty emerging alongside the COVID-19 pandemic became calamitous and infelicitous-crisis for vulnerable households in the absence of robust social safety-nets. Corona-virus emerged mysteriously in China as the biggest ever challenge for the economies, health and medical services capabilities globally. The superficial and misleading understanding of multifaceted nature of human deprivation has led to poorly-targeted schemes and tardy implementation of the same. The experience and incidence of the pervasive deprivation in Indian society is hierarchically graded and varied in nature, extent and forms. Hunger

can be removed through a multitude of anti-hunger and anti-poverty economic policies and not through populist legerdemain. However, most policies in the developing world have been reduced to the artifice of politicians.

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