

# The Elephant in the Dark: Finding ways to end India's hunger and malnutrition

Harsh Mander and Ashwin Parulkar

The discourse around the pathways for ensuring sufficient and assured food and nutrition for all children, women and men in India has been rich, vigorous and diverse. However this paper argues that a much greater problem than the occasional antagonism between scholars is that many participants in the food and nutrition discourse in India tend to operate in separate silos with little interaction and learning from one another, positing their diverse positions as oppositional rather than complementary truths. Exploring five such streams, or competing discourse—food security, food sovereignty, the discourse of the 'nutrition community', inequality discourse, and public provisioning and the right to food—we will argue in this paper that the major fallacy is to view these alternate explanations as mutually exclusive, or as competing, absolute truths (as its proponents often tend – overtly or tacitly - to present them). Instead, each are complementary but in themselves incomplete truths.



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## Finding ways to end India's hunger and malnutrition<sup>1</sup>

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The discourse around the pathways for ensuring sufficient and assured food and nutrition for all children, women and men in India has been rich, vigorous and diverse. These discussions, to which scholars, policy-makers, activists and the lay public have energetically contributed, have been sometimes fractious and even occasionally bitter and adversarial. But we will argue in this paper that a much greater problem than the occasional antagonism between scholars in each of these areas is that many participants in the food and nutrition discourse in India tend to operate in separate silos with little interaction and learning from one another, positing their diverse positions as oppositional rather than complementary truths.

We are reminded of an ancient Indian fable – rooted in Jain, Buddhist, Sufi and Hindu traditions – about five blind men trying to understand what an elephant looks like. Some versions talk of sighted men in a dark room, and we prefer this rendering because in our experience we have found blind persons frequently very insightful about their surroundings despite their impairment. (Strangely, women never figure in any versions we could find of this story). These sighted men in the dark room try to understand what an elephant looks like by feeling various parts of it. One touches the legs and is convinced it is like a pillar; another strokes the belly, certain that it is like a wall; a third the tail, confident that it is like a rope; a fourth the ear, positive that it is like a hand fan; and a fifth the tusk, sure that the elephant is a hard cone. The men argue long, bitterly and inconclusively, unable to brook or understand what they see as the obvious fallacy of all the other observers. The point that each of them misses is that all are right, but all incompletely so. It is our conviction that most of the competing Indian narratives around food sufficiency and nutrition are likewise true, but each taken alone is *incompletely* true.

This paper will try to map some of the major debates exploring the ‘elephant’ of India’s failure to end hunger and malnutrition. This ‘elephant’ is one of modern India’s most complex riddles: why such high levels of hunger and malnourishment stubbornly persist in a country with the wealth, food production, democratic institutions and state capacities to ensure food and nutrition for all. (This question has been variously described as the Indian food security enigma (Pritchard *et al.* 2013), India’s great paradox (Mander 2012), and India’s nutritional emergency (Dreze 2003)). We will argue in this paper that the major fallacy is to view the alternate explanations as mutually exclusive, or as competing, absolute truths (as its proponents often tend – overtly or tacitly - to present them). Instead, each are complementary but in themselves incomplete truths. Changing metaphors occasionally, we will argue that none of these are ‘silver bullets’ which will alone solve the chronic problem of India’s intractable hunger and malnutrition. But action around each of these is important to contribute in diverse ways to tackle elements of the problem. Only when taken together, can they provide a more complete picture to understand both what causes such stubborn levels of hunger and malnutrition to persist, but also suggest pathways to end this unfortunate perpetuation of avoidable human suffering.

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The paper will identify five major streams of these competitive treatises, or if one carries forward the metaphor of the elephant, five distinct body-parts of the ‘elephant’ of India’s hunger and malnutrition enigma. The first of these body-parts relates to food security, in the context of growing enough food with appropriate agricultural policies and technologies, and the failures of India’s farm policies leading to enormous rural distress. Related but distinct in its emphasis and policy prescriptions are the discussions of food sovereignty, which stress local self-sufficiency and control over food production and distribution systems, and advocate ecologically sustainable technologies. Other scholars and policy-makers – sometimes called the ‘nutrition community’- emphasise non-food determinants of nutrition, including clean water, sanitation and health care, which have primary bearing not so much on the intake as the absorption of food. A fourth large body of discussion is on inequality: of gender, class, caste, religion, disability and ethnic identities, which create diverse and sometimes nearly impenetrable barriers for people with one or more of these disadvantages to access decent work and livelihoods, food, clean water, sanitation and health care. And finally there are conversations about the policies of social protection and the right to food, and the need to create legal and enforceable duties for the state to publicly provision food, through programmes such as subsidised grain transfers, cooked meals in schools, child care centres and soup kitchens and destitute feeding centres, unconditional cash transfers such as to the aged and maternity benefits, and a legal right to work. The paper will conclude by trying to answer some of the prominent critiques of the law passed by India’s Parliament in the monsoon of 2013 which legally guarantees food provisioning, with making the case for such a law as a partial imperative, even while acknowledging and in the light of the shared but partial truths of all the other four streams of discourses.

## **Body-Part One: Food Security**

One very large body of scholarship and policy conversations focus on the broad area of what is called ‘food security’. There are in the literature more than 200 different definitions of food security (FAO 2003), but what all of these definitions have in common is the understanding that hunger can never end unless we have in place policies, technologies and strategies to ensure that we grow enough food for every mouth. Within this stream which focuses on the need to increase food production, there are again sharply divergent perspectives of what is required to ensure enough food for all people at all times, now and into the future. Some stress the central role of new agricultural technologies, even genetically modified crops; others call for ‘appropriate’ sustainable technologies; others favour trade policy liberalisation and globalisation; others land reforms and rural livelihood enhancement; and much larger public investments in rural credit and rural infrastructure and ensuring the viability of farming.

In a country in which the economy was enfeebled by two centuries of colonial rule and which was humiliatingly and precariously dependent on food aid to feed its vast populations, it was not surprising that national food security was a dominant policy preoccupation in the early decades after Independence. ‘Grow More Food’ became a national campaign, state officials were immersed in agricultural extension, agricultural universities were awash with new technologies, and Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri’s slogan *Jai Jawaan Jai Kisaan*<sup>3</sup> resonated with people across the country: the farmer (along with the soldier because of a series of wars with Pakistan and China) became the country’s heroes. With the aid of new high-yielding technologies, India made spectacular leaps in its food production to become (Chand 2010) fully self-sufficient in just 10 to 15 years.

But the seeds for the current crisis in Indian agriculture were already laid in the strategy of the Green Revolution, which placed all its bets on a few agriculturally prosperous regions, and on technologies which required levels of investment and risk-taking which were not feasible for small farmers. The impoverishment of the small farmer in rain-fed agricultural regions was aggravated by the subversion of land reform laws and the sluggish growth of the non-farm sector. Worries about the sustainability

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<sup>3</sup> Literally ‘Hail Soldier, Hail Farmer’

of these food production strategies led MS Swaminathan, widely regarded as the father of India's Green Revolution, to call for a transition to an 'Evergreen Revolution' (2006). He recognised the grave dangers created by indiscriminate application of chemical fertilisers and pesticides, irrigation without drainage, leading to land degradation, ground water and forest depletion.

However, the crisis deepened with the policies of structural adjustment initiated in the 1990s, which many felt integrated the farmer with the global economy too quickly and without sufficient protections or preparation; this was accompanied also by a decline in public investment in agriculture. Annual agricultural growth decelerated from 3.5 per cent during 1981-1997 to 2 per cent during 1997-2005. Agriculture employs nearly 58 per cent of India's total workforce and generates more than 55 per cent of rural income (Kadiyala et al 2012). Despite this, agriculture's share in the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) fell to 15 per cent compared to the corporate sector, which employs less than 1 per cent of the work force, and the services sector, employing 9 per cent of the work force, which account for 33 per cent and 55 per cent of GDP, respectively (Right to Food Campaign 2010). And while India is a food surplus nation (FAO 2011), agricultural production began to fall short of population growth rates in the early part of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Production lags have recently recovered but the sustainability of agriculture in India remains a worry – since the 1991 economic reforms, farmers have experienced declines in farm income, consumption, employment, and credit availability (Pal and Ghosh 2007). Additionally, high incidences of farmers suicides and the below subsistence-level food expenditure of farm households across India, has forced even the Government of India to admit that the country faces an agricultural crisis (Bello 2007; Sainath 2012; NSSO; Singh 2006). For a sector which employs more than half the working population and contributes 15 per cent of the GDP, public investment is as low as 5 per cent. And much of this investment again benefited disproportionately the large farmer, with high subsidies on chemical fertilisers, pesticides and electricity.

Drawing from the Economic Survey 2011, Saxena points out that foodgrain production in India dropped from 208 kg per annum per capita in 1996–97 to 186 kg in 2009–10, a decline of 11 per cent. He observes further that despite reduced grain production, India has been exporting an average of 7 million tonnes of cereals per annum, causing availability to decline further by 15 per cent. This has adversely affected the cereal intake of the bottom 20 per cent of the population which continues to be at least 20 per cent less than the cereal intake of the top decile of the population, despite the rich doing less manual work and consuming many expensive and nutritious non-cereal foods (Saxena 2012). Moreover, 'further scope for increase in net sown area is limited. Land degradation has increased, in the form of depletion of soil fertility, erosion, and waterlogging. Long-term factors, such as steeper decline in per capita land availability and shrinking farm size, are also responsible for the slow performance of agriculture' (Dev 2012).

Trying desperately to cope with the double whammy of globalisation and a retreating state, middle and small farmers fell more and more into debt from unregulated, mainly private creditors, and over-exploiting ground water and chemical inputs in ways that pushed down ground water to alarming levels and gravely compromised soil fertility. This led to bad debts and an epidemic of farmer suicides. Montek Ahluwalia (2002) still believes that globalisation benefited Indian farmers because 'reduction of protection to industry, and the accompanying depreciation in the exchange rate, has tilted relative prices in favour of agriculture and helped agricultural exports' (Ahluwalia 2002). The index of agricultural prices relative to manufactured products has increased by almost 30 per cent in the ten years after globalisation. 'The share of India's agricultural exports in world exports of the same commodities increased from 1.1 per cent in 1990 to 1.9 per cent in 1999, whereas it had declined in the ten years before the reforms' (Ahluwalia 2002). But even he admits that agriculture suffered from the decline in public investment in areas critical for agricultural growth, such as irrigation and drainage, soil conservation and water management systems, and rural roads.

However Jayati Ghosh (2005) argues that agriculture in India was hurt by trade policies that favoured large farmers and overall economic policies that scaled back the state, but also because no specific agricultural reforms accompanied the dramatic policy shifts of the early 1990s. The lack of such

reforms negatively impacted not only agricultural production, but also, for instance, protection of resources which are increasingly under the control of corporations and private interests and overall rural employment. Yet, the direct relationship between trade, liberalization, and agriculture is complex, she notes, as farmers bear the costs and benefits of a range of factors impacting both international and domestic markets. Also, these factors are not easy to predict or identify as crop price fluctuations in world markets are volatile. But the most relevant factors, of course, are those that create possibilities for agricultural growth, sustainability of cultivation, as well as impacts on employment and food security.

She says that policymakers assumed that freeing agricultural markets and liberalizing external trade in farm commodities would provide price incentives, lead to greater investment and output into agriculture overall, and would shift the terms of trade between sectors in India in favour of agriculture. But that did not happen because the government reduced public spending at the same time that it adopted fiscal policies that benefited the corporate sector. Economic reforms not only resulted in trade imbalances in agricultural goods, she argues, but have also affected the conditions and patterns of cultivation for the small farmer (Ghosh 2005).

Pravin Jha argues that poverty in rural India is due to the inability of the organized sector to absorb the large numbers of agricultural workers forced out of farming. He contends that after World War II South Korea implemented policies of land redistribution and macro-economic reforms such as public support to agriculture, marketing of farm products, and greater emphasis on education. While the percentage of land redistributed from 1950 to 2005 was about 30-40 per cent in South Korea, that figure is a mere 1 per cent in India (70 per cent of which occurred in just three states). In 1950, the per capita incomes of India and South Korea were relatively equal. Today however, South Korea far surpasses India in per capita income and all indicators of basic well-being. (Jha 2012).

It is interesting that both internationally and in India, notions of government obligations to prevent hunger have swung from considerations of production, to distribution, and now as is evident from these critiques, back to production. In the 1960s and 70s, the idea of food security developed, largely focussing on the supply side: 'of assuring the availability and to some degree the price stability of basic foodstuffs at the international and national levels' (FAO 2009). This was before food security was viewed and conceptualised through the lens of human rights. In the decades which followed, the focus shifted from production to distribution - to access entitlements and not mere food availability. This was influenced by studies such as by Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen that famines occur even when food is plentiful, but people do not have the means to access this food (Drèze, Sen 1989). But now the clock swings back – especially in the light of the crisis in agriculture – again to issues of production and availability of food.

In India, the Right to Food Campaign and other critics point out that ironically, food producers such as small-farmers and agricultural labourers whose 'access' to food is 'directly connected with their livelihood', are among those most afflicted by hunger. Most of India's 231 million hungry people live in rural areas and depend on some form of agricultural work to survive. As net consumers of food their livelihood security and purchasing power are at the mercy of policies that impact agricultural production and food prices, which have been rising since the initial 2007-08 food price hikes (International Labor Organization 2011; Patnaik 2009).

India's crisis in agriculture is therefore linked to its crisis of hunger, which has resulted in the growing realization that the revival of the agrarian sector is a key to economic growth as well as food security (Himanshu 2012). Specifically, critics argue that to achieve food security it is imperative to assure farmers inviolable and equitable access to land, water, and affordable inputs required to meet India's food requirement (Sinha 2011). But this goal will remain elusive if farmers continue to suffer from unemployment, displacement, landlessness<sup>4</sup>, and chronic hunger. Each of these problems has

increased since the post-reform era as a result, in part, of decreased public investment in agriculture and corporate incursion into all aspects of the food supply chain. (Pal and Ghosh 2007) .

There is wide agreement that this requires much larger public investments which focus on small farmers in rain-fed areas. Saxena (2012) believes that the ‘most important intervention that is needed is greater investment in irrigation, power, agricultural research and development, and roads in the poorer regions of central and eastern India, where the concentration of poverty is increasing’. He also feels that government should ‘push up the direct purchase of paddy in states like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh (UP), and Madhya Pradesh (MP) where the paddy farmers are largely dependent on rice millers who pay a pittance, thus depriving farmers in these states the benefit of the minimum support price that Haryana and Punjab farmers enjoy’. Swaminthan (2006) stresses the need for water harvesting, watershed development, wasteland reclamation, and anti-desertification measures.

Along with these debates about ways to restore Indian agriculture and sustain the growth of food production, there has developed over time more nuanced understanding of what constitutes food security, and this has been further informed by the rights discourse. It is widely acknowledged today that global or national food security is not enough. People need food security at local, and household levels, and even individual levels given intra-family inequalities of gender and age. According to the UN Special Rapporteur, legislation on the right to food should go beyond just ensuring access to adequate food. ‘The right to food is not a right to a minimum ration of calories, proteins or other specific nutrients, or a right to be fed,’ he writes. ‘It is about being guaranteed the right to feed oneself, which requires not only that food is available – that the ratio of production to population is sufficient – but also that it is accessible – i.e. that each household either has the means to produce or buy its own food (De Schutter, <http://www.srfood.org/en/right-to-food>) .’

The food security discourse has also gradually shifted from food availability to food access, and the recognition that this access must be not just physical, but also economic and social. Acknowledging the need for economic and social access reflects a welcome understanding of socio-economic barriers to food access. There is also wide recognition today within the food security discourse that even access is not enough, and there is need for absorption of the food consumed, signalling acknowledgment of the significance of non-food elements of nutrition which will be discussed later in this paper, such as sanitation and clean drinking water. There is further understanding that food security involves access to culturally appropriate food, which is one of the premises of the food sovereignty advocates, whose arguments we will consider in the next section. This gradually expanding and increasingly nuanced discourse around food security reflects a welcome example of the willingness in this set of conversations to see more of the full ‘elephant’ of ensuring food and nutrition to all.

## **Body-Part Two: Food Sovereignty**

Closely related to the food security discourse are discussions around food sovereignty, the second body-part of the elephant of India’s hunger riddle. Its proponents believe, like advocates of food security, that the revival of agriculture is at the heart of the solution of hunger and malnutrition. But unlike many (but not all) food security advocates, they are convinced that the answers lie alone in establishing local food production systems, with local self-sufficiency insofar as inputs and markets are concerned. They believe that the food security of people will be best secured if they produce and consume their own food, relying primarily on local markets, and if they depend locally also for the inputs of their agriculture: local indigenous seeds and local organic fertilisers. The food sovereignty position is a ‘discourse and strategy about food that prioritises local over non-local, biologically diverse agro-ecologies over mono-cropping systems, and local control over agricultural rhythms over systems attached to corporate interests and intellectual property’ (Pritchard *et al* 2013: 54).

A charismatic and globally influential proponent of this position is Vandana Shiva. Many elements of her critique of the Green Revolution are now accepted even by those who do not accept her full rejection of modern agricultural technologies. Not many disagree with her declaration that the Green

Revolution has created a form of agriculture plagued by ‘reduced genetic diversity, increased vulnerability to pests, soil erosion, water shortages, reduced soil fertility, micronutrient deficiencies, soil contamination, [and] reduced availability of nutritious food crops for the local population’ (Shiva, 1991: 57). She rightly argues that the apparent ‘high-yield’ of these new technologies is ephemeral, because the estimates of high yields ignore the grave social costs of ecological damage caused by these technologies. They result in reduced biomass for animals and soil. The Green Revolution, she believes, is premised on the creation of surpluses through destruction of systems: ‘The strategy for creating a fictitious abundance has become a means for creating real scarcity by destroying the quiet ways of nature’s work, peasants’ work and women’s work’ (Shiva 1988). She calls for ‘seed sovereignty’ as the foundation of food sovereignty. ‘If farmers do not have their own seeds or access to open pollinated varieties that they can save, improve and exchange, they have no seed sovereignty - and consequently no food sovereignty. The deepening agrarian and food crisis has its roots in changes in the seed supply system, and the erosion of seed diversity and seed sovereignty. (<http://blogs.worldwatch.org/nourishingtheplanet/whoever-controls-the-food-system-controls-democracy-vandana-shivas-take-on-the-profit-driven-food-system/>).

There is today a wide body of empirical research which supports her broad claims about the ecological damage of Green Revolution technologies. Illustratively, studies confirm (as noted in Pritchard *et al*, 2013) grave declines in groundwater (Vaidyanathan, 2006; Rodell *et al.*, 2009), the loss of soil micronutrients from intensive cropping (Baker and Jewitt, 2007: 330) and the unsustainable situation whereby global agriculture contributes one-third of world greenhouse gas emissions (Harvey and Pilgrim, 2010).

The problem that several commentators have with arguments made by food sovereignty advocates is their outright rejection of modern agriculture, which entails a full-scale return to pre-Green Revolution farming techniques. Studies by Akhil Gupta (1998), Kathleen Baker and Sarah Jewitt (Baker and Jewitt, 2007) suggest that small and middle farmers themselves do not reject new technologies entirely. They only seek greater caution in applying them to diverse local situations, which could be aided by public investment into agricultural research and extension services. Swaminathan (2006) likewise believes that rejecting modern science is not an option as more and more mouths have to be fed with finite availability of land and water. ‘The need for more food has to be met through higher yields per units of land, water, energy and time. We need to examine how science can be mobilized to raise further the biological productivity ceiling without associated ecological harm. Scientific progress on the farms, as an “*ever-green revolution*,” must emphasize that the productivity advance is sustainable over time since it is rooted in the principles of ecology, economics, social and gender equity, and employment generation’.

It is also unclear how urban populations will establish and survive with local food systems. The problem with the food sovereignty perspectives is not with their findings or the cautions they espouse: it is with the absolutism of their policy conclusions, their dismissal, even denunciation, of alternative positions which do not reject their conclusion, but seek to nuance them. Shiva believes that the root of hunger and malnutrition is in the ‘ecologically non-sustainable and socially unjust food and agriculture system.’ There is much evidence which supports the belief that unsustainable agriculture has aggravated food availability. But the argument neglects the other body-parts of the ‘elephant’ of the food and nutrition enigma which needs to be understood in its totality, and that hunger and malnutrition are located in an unjust and unequal society of which the unjust food system is one part, not the whole. Therefore rebuilding sustainable agricultural systems are critical to food security, but this is not by itself a full or complete answer to the enormous human, socio-economic and policy challenge of feeding all people.

Similarly Devendra Sharma is right when he argues that an ‘economically viable and sustainable agriculture’ should be ‘at the centre of the food security programme. With nearly 2,500 farmers

quitting agriculture every day, and nowhere to go, the scourge of hunger is only going to multiply<sup>5</sup>. But he is absolutist when he peremptorily rejects all measures for state food provisioning including the PDS as mere ‘doles’ to keep the majority of the population dependent for all time. ‘Hunger and malnutrition’, he also declares ‘grew at a time when we had more anganwadis set up, and more schools being provided with mid-day meals’. Suman Sahai also characterises state food provisioning as doles. ‘We should be shocked that the government is willing to put so many people on dole to win an election but is not willing to take steps to support farmers, strengthen agriculture and food production and make people self-reliant (<http://devinder-sharma.blogspot.in/2013/07/food-security-bill-why-it-is.html>).’

We regard it as unfortunate that measures for state food provisioning to meet the imperative of addressing immediate and avoidable human suffering are being framed as constituting a mutually exclusive and opposed pathway to measures for addressing the ‘basic causes’ of hunger, and indeed then somehow subordinating the former to the latter, or to rejecting the former altogether. We agree emphatically that fundamental solutions are required to address hunger and malnutrition, and these include importantly supporting farmers, especially small and medium farmers in rain-fed regions of the country. But we also recognise that we still do not have a full comprehensive understanding of how hunger can best be extinguished, as this paper seeks to demonstrate. The performance of the state to address the problem has not been uniformly inspiring or successful. In such a situation, we ask if it is responsible and humane to dub the school meal which a child gets, or the supplementary feeding to infants and expectant and lactating mothers as mere wasteful ‘doles’ which need to end? I have in the course of my work both in district governments and as Special Commissioner of the Supreme Court interacted with several thousands of people, both rural and urban, who live with hunger or the threat of falling into hunger. For them, state provisioning is crucial to their struggles for survival, far from being inessential ‘doles’. Should we just dismiss the value *they* place on food entitlement programmes? There is also an even more worrying underlying sub-text to this suggested opposition between state food provisioning and strengthening agriculture. It can be interpreted as seeing the farming food growers’ interests as being separate and even opposed to those of landless labourers who are dependent of wage-work guarantees like the MG NREGA and the poor urban consumer who cannot grow food and must buy it in the market or in a subsidised retail shop.

We recognise that there are three ways that a person can secure food with dignity. One is to grow the food, the second to earn sufficient money to purchase the food, and the third is through state provisioning. Of course we aspire and need to collectively work to reach the day when people either grow enough food, or have decent waged work or self-employment sufficient to enable them to feed themselves and their families. For reaching that day, the insights of the food sovereignty community are invaluable, but we stress that these insights – indeed as all single-themed set of insights – are inadequate to illuminate all pathways to end hunger. And what happens in the intervening years or decades to the hundreds of million people living with hunger and malnutrition today? In a country where great wealth and sufficient food is being produced, can it be our case that while we embark on the long and necessary pathway of strengthening sustainable agriculture, we meanwhile dismantle systems of state food provisioning?.

It is important to understand how the objectives of the PDS changed from its inception in the 1960s until after market reforms in the 1990s. The initial objectives, well summarised by Chand (2005), were raising food production and improving food availability. The strategies to ensure this included: ‘(a) price assurance to producers using the system of minimum support prices (MSP) implemented through obligatory procurement, (b) inter- and intra-year price stability through open market operations, (c) maintaining buffer stocks, and (d) distribution of foodgrains at reasonable prices through the public distribution system (PDS)’. Before economic reforms in the 1990s, the PDS provided subsidized grains to a large number of poor households below market prices as one part of the government’s food security strategy to increase food production and availability (Chand 2005). This changed in 1997 upon the World Bank’s insistence that the Indian government comply with

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liberalization measures. This entailed reducing the food subsidy and converting the universal PDS to a targeted system, where only households identified by government through Below Poverty Line (BPL) surveys were eligible to purchase grains from government fair price shops at reduced rates. As a result of the food subsidy cuts, a large share of the cost to maintain the system was shifted to consumers in the form of higher Above Poverty Line (APL) and Below Poverty Line (BPL) prices. The government doubled APL prices and increased BPL prices by about 80 percent (Pal and Ghosh 2007). Drastic price hikes resulted in reduced purchases of subsidized grain, which led to stock piles of rice and wheat in government warehouses above buffer norms. In 1998, the central government held about 18 million tonnes of grain in reserve, but by 2003, the combination of high food prices and low purchasing power resulted in over 50 million tonnes of grain being held in government silos (Sen 2003). These numbers have been as high as 80 million tonnes in July 2012 and 74 million tonnes in July 2013.

Chand argues that the way in which the government raised the Minimum Support Price (MSP) -- guaranteed to farmers for the public procurement of wheat and rice -- after the rupee was devalued to meet structural adjustment requirements also played a role in higher food prices and the accumulation of grains above buffer norms. Prior to liberalization, the government pegged the MSP for crops on domestic factors, such as the cost of production. The agricultural sector was largely protected from international price fluctuations at this time. After the rupee was devalued and Indian farmers entered the global market, the government raised the MSP for rice and wheat to reduce the gap between domestic and international prices. This may have benefited Indian agriculture, overall, if small farmers and farmers from impoverished rural areas benefited from the MSP. In reality, this policy was not extended to many poor states such as Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and eastern Uttar Pradesh. On the demand side, high rural unemployment eroded the rural poor's buying power so 'increases in food prices led to dramatic declines in off-take, because they were incompatible with the depressed purchasing power of consumers, especially in rural areas' (Ghosh 2005). Pillay argues that these policies -- food subsidy cuts and an erratic implementation of higher MSPs -- changed cultivation patterns and incentives of farmers: some 'began cultivating cash crops for export which exposed them to the volatilities of the international market and threatened food security because of the reduction in staple crop farming' (Pillay 2009). These policies made it difficult for the rural poor to buy affordable grains from the public food system. They also reduced support, overall, to farmers in producing staple crops. Yet, the government was also set back because the inability to off-load grains at established prices had the ironic effect of actually increasing expenditure to maintain the faulty system.

It is no doubt that the PDS is plagued with serious flaws, including leakages confirmed even by Planning Commission studies (Planning Commission 2012). But the MSP provides protection to wheat and rice farmers if it is implemented uniformly across the country, particularly for small farmers. There is need to extend it to states like Bihar, UP and MP where, as pointed out by Saxena (2012) as a consequence of failures of MSP, paddy growers are at the mercy of rice millers to sell their produce well below MSP prices. The dismantling of half a million ration outlets, which supply nearly half the cereal requirements of the households it reaches, and its replacement with a community-based local food bank would be rash, depriving farmers of MSP protection and millions of consumers of subsidised essential cereals. The local food banks which Sharma recommends have much to commend them as local pilots, but there is no pathway to ensure its duplication nation-wide on a scale which replaces the PDS.

Suman Sahai's suggestion is more pertinent: 'the only realistic way of tackling the leaking public distribution system is to decentralise procurement and distribution, increase public participation and transparency. This can be best done by procuring the grain (and other foods) locally. The closer the procurement centre is to the distribution centre, the greater the possibility of people's vigilance and, therefore, diminished opportunities for pilferage'. We entirely agree. Chattisgarh has done precisely this, and has also shown that it is possible to fix the PDS, with a series of wide-ranging reforms, including removal of all private retailers, ensuring doorstep delivery of grain to ration shops to

prevent pilferage, and end-to-end computerisation. Khera (2011) in a study of PDS found it functioning relatively well also in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and Rajasthan.

Even so, the influence of food sovereignty is enormous and salutary on current thinking and developments around food security, especially its wise caution that technologies and economic policies should be such that small food producers and especially women producers are enabled to retain control over inputs and markets. Maxwell (1996) speaks of post-modernism in the food security discourse. He finds a movement away from the conviction that modern science would provide definitive over-arching answers to the world's problems. Accordingly today far fewer people are convinced that the demand to produce enough food requires above all the scientific domination of nature. Instead there is now much greater faith in diversity, eclecticism, reliance on local knowledge, and finding local solutions to local problems. This is the legacy and influence of food sovereignty perspectives, for which we must be indebted.

### **Body-Part Three: Non-food determinants of Nutrition**

It is now widely understood and accepted that intake of sufficient food is necessary, but not in itself sufficient to guarantee good nutrition. It is possible – and this is indeed often found to be the case – that even if a person is well-fed, she may still be malnourished. Her body may be unable to absorb the food due to repeated infections caused, in part, by living in an unsanitary environment. Or she may not have access to a diversified diet with adequate nutrients required to both grow into a healthy and strong adult and fight off disease. The former, particularly, underlines the importance – when trying to unravel the mystery of the full ‘elephant’ of malnutrition and hunger – of the vital elephant body-parts of ‘non-food’ determinants of nutrition. The latter underscores the importance of the access to a diversity of necessary nutrients in the food she does eat, sometimes overlooked in the discourse on food security.

The WHO defines malnutrition as a medical and social disorder rooted in poverty that is dependent on the interaction of the intake of food and the overall state of health and the physical environment. It concerns conditions where a person has not enough, as well as too much food, and the body's response to a wide range of infections that result in mal-absorption of nutrients or the inability to use nutrients properly to maintain health<sup>6</sup>. Clinically, malnutrition is defined as the inadequate intake of protein, energy and micronutrients such as vitamins, and the resultant of frequent infections and disorders.

The rates of malnutrition amongst Indian children and adults are amongst the worst in the world. 46.7 per cent of India's children are underweight and about 35 per cent of adults are malnourished (World Development Indicators 2007). Malnutrition can have devastating consequences, such as physical and cognitive impairment of development, increased burden of disease, and in extreme cases, even loss of life. According to the latest National Family Health Survey- 3 (NFHS - 3) conducted in 2005-06, 43 per cent of children under five years of age were underweight, 48 per cent were stunted and 20 per cent were wasted. The proportion of children in India under-five years of age who are underweight is almost 20 times as high as would be expected in a healthy, well-nourished population and is almost twice as high as the average percentage of underweight children in sub-Saharan African countries (International Institute for Population Sciences 2007). In the 100 worst districts based on the child development district developed for UNICEF in India in 2009, 42 per cent of children under-five years of age were underweight and 59 per cent stunted. Of the children suffering from stunting, about half were severely stunted (HUNGaMA Report 2011). The effects of malnutrition in the first two years of a child's life are also irreversible, evidenced by lower educational levels and worse health conditions throughout life. This is especially relevant in the case of India. A recent HUNGaMA study of child malnutrition, which covered about 20 per cent of the child population, revealed that 42 per cent of children in 100 focus districts under the age of 5 are underweight and 59 per cent are stunted

<sup>6</sup> WHO, [http://www.who.int/water\\_sanitation\\_health/diseases/malnutrition/en/](http://www.who.int/water_sanitation_health/diseases/malnutrition/en/)

(HUNGaMA 2012). The authors conclude that the prevalence of malnutrition is significantly higher among children of low-income families and that the condition starts very early in life (HUNGaMA 2012).

Malnutrition may be the result of one or more reasons. Insufficient access to food is an important reason of malnutrition. As we have seen, a person may have inadequate access to food because of insufficient availability of food, inability to grow enough food, inadequate means to procure food or/and inability to access food related assistance. Despite access to adequate quantity of food, a person may succumb to malnutrition if her food does not have adequate amounts of calories, protein and micronutrients such as vitamins. People may also fall prey to malnutrition despite being able to access adequate quantities of nutritious food. This happens when they are unable to absorb the nutrients in their food, because of infectious diseases such as diarrhoea<sup>7</sup> and other infections. Malnutrition in turn makes the body more susceptible to infectious diseases, thereby triggering a vicious cycle, especially amongst children (WHO 2009). Unsanitary living conditions and unclean water lead to repeated infections which result in malnutrition (Ghosh 2006). Inadequate access to healthcare prolongs the duration and/or severity of the infections, which exacerbates the inability of the body to absorb nutrients.<sup>8</sup> The combination of inadequate food and unsanitary conditions, according to John Butterly and Jack Shepard, can lead to state of malnutrition because the body is doubly vulnerable – the lack of nutritious food rids the body of necessary protein, energy, and micro-nutrients while exposure to unsanitary conditions makes it easier for viral and bacterial infections to occur frequently (Butterly, Shepard 2010).

There has recently been an important contribution to understanding the paradox of high persisting malnutrition in India by stressing the major contribution of lack of sanitation. Robert Chambers and Gregor von Medeazza (2013) write that ‘The puzzle of persistent undernutrition in India is largely explained by open defecation, population density, and lack of sanitation and hygiene’. They rely on a study by Dean Spears (2012), which analyses 140 demographic and health surveys to conclude that open defecation accounts for much of the excess stunting in India, where 53 per cent people defecate in the open. This exposes children to faecally-transmitted infections, and not just the diarrhoeas, which have attracted at least some attention so far. They conclude that sanitation has been a ‘blind spot’ in understanding malnutrition in India, and believe that ‘In hygienic conditions much of the undernutrition in India would disappear.’ Adi Narayan in Bloomberg (2013) writes how extra food means nothing to stunted kids with bad water. ‘You really can’t address stunting unless you clean up the sanitary environment,’ said Clarissa Brocklehurst, UNICEF’s former chief of water, sanitation and hygiene, who worked in India from 1999 to 2001. ‘It doesn’t matter how much extra food you try to stick into kids or how much dietary supplements you give them, it will all just go through them.’

These insights are invaluable for illuminating neglected aspects of public action in tackling the complex beast of malnutrition. But the problem is when these interventions are seen as pitted *against* other aspects of the problem of hunger and malnourishment. Pravir Srinath (2013) for instance writes acerbically, ‘Not only does the Food Security Bill show poor economic reasoning, and flawed policy design, it is also treating the wrong problem. What national policies need to focus on are rural and urban sanitation along with the provision of clean drinking water. Not on quaint notions of food security...The mistake has been in assuming that this is because people do not have enough food to eat. Nutrition is not just about what people eat – but about how well the body is able to utilise it. Could it be, that people are losing their health, not because of the lack of food but because of recurring bouts of dysentery, diarrhoea and an infection from a host of parasites? Could the problem here be a lack of sanitation and not food insecurity? Could the problem have been fundamentally misdiagnosed?’ In a similar tenor, Arvind Virmani writes in the Times of India (2013) on how we need a ‘hunger elimination’ act coupled with a strong policy focus on clean water, sanitation and communication about good nutrition instead of a gargantuan food security bill.

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<sup>7</sup> In diarrhoea, the frequent stools prevent the adequate absorption of nutrients.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

We believe that just as the food security and food sovereignty advocates are correct in stressing food production and sustainable agriculture as significant for addressing malnutrition and hunger, but incorrect in suggesting that these interventions exclude all others, likewise it is equally valuable to look at evidence about the close connections between bad sanitation, fouled drinking water and malnutrition, but it is incorrect to claim that this is the ‘silver bullet’ to the exclusion of all other interventions.

It is misleading to suggest that insignificant numbers of persons lack adequate food intakes, or in other words sleep hungry. Based on a range of nutrition indicators – the percentage of a country’s population that is undernourished, the proportion of children five years old who are underweight, and the mortality rate of children under five – the International Food Policy Research Institute’s latest Global Hunger Index puts the number of hungry and malnourished people in India at over 230 million people. Critics on the other hand refer to the NSSO 2005 findings on self-reported hunger, which they calculate to be only 2 million persons. But NC Saxena has brought attention to the fact that method used in official NSSO surveys of hunger in India – referred to as ‘self-reported hunger’, which involves asking people if they’ve had two square meals a day – has resulted in severe underestimates. Based on this, there was a ‘drastic decline in self-reported hunger in India from 16.1 to 1.9 per cent (Saxena 2008). Saxena points out that while this may reflect a significant improvement in the number or people that live with the most severe forms of hunger, the data does not include the conditions of people who live with chronic hunger that involve the lack of adequate and nutritious food over time required to live a healthy life.

Our own studies of starvation and destitution in many parts of the country confirm that there are large populations who simply do not get enough to eat. In a study on government reported starvation deaths across ten villages in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Jharkhand, we observed in *all* of the nearly 30 cases that the demise of each victim were -- and current struggles their families face are – the result of multiple concurrent deprivations: the lack of access to work and food, safe and quality primary schools, clean drinking water, sanitation, and affordable healthcare to treat endemic infectious diseases, to name a few<sup>9</sup>. It is perilous to therefore reject out of hand feeding or subsidised food programmes, pitting them against public interventions for clean drinking water and sanitation.

Recently, the discourse on malnutrition shifted also from debates on factors that lead to -- and adequately describe – the Indian context to questions over the extent to which policy-makers have an accurate understanding of the scale of the problem of malnutrition in the country. Economist Arvind Panagriya landed the first punch in *Economic & Political Weekly*, arguing that current child malnutrition rates in India, which put the number of stunted and underweight children above those in sub-Saharan Africa, are inflated. He suggested that uniform standards of child height and weight measurement, put forth by the World Health Organization and promoted by the United Nations, are too rigid to account for the complex manifestations of malnutrition that may arise from ‘genetic, environmental, cultural, and geographical factors’ (Panagriya 2013). He compared maternal and child health indicators between India and range of sub-Saharan African countries. India fares worse in child weights and heights for age than most of the 33 selected SSA countries, according to international data, but nearly each of the selected African countries register higher rates of infant, under-five, and maternal mortality rates. He claimed that it is implausible for a society with high numbers of malnourished children to have lower death rates in comparison to poorer countries for each of these populations. Inaccurate methods of measurement, he concluded, were responsible for this inconsistency. Instead of height and weight measurements, policymakers should, he said, instruct measuring two components of malnutrition that can only be assessed by a thorough medical examination: protein energy malnutrition, ‘which manifests in poor gains in height, weight, and head

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<sup>9</sup> The 2011 [Global Hunger Index](#) (GHI) Report places India amongst the three countries where the GHI between 1996 and 2011 went up from 22.9 to 23.7, while 78 out of the 81 developing countries studied, including Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Vietnam, Kenya, Nigeria, Myanmar, Uganda, Zimbabwe and Malawi, succeeded in improving hunger conditions. Source: ["2011 Global Hunger Index Report"](#). [International Food Policy Research Institute](#) (IFPRI)

and mid-upper arm circumference,’ and micronutrient deficiencies, which ‘result from low levels of iron, folate, iodine, and various vitamins (ibid.).

These arguments led to a furore of rebuttals to this published in a later issue of *Economic & Political Weekly*. A group of academics and nutrition specialists associated with the Right to Food Campaign warned against dismissing height and weight measurements outright as appropriate indicators of malnutrition. ‘Measuring heights and weights is not new and India has been measuring populations for nutrition status since the 1970s, and this includes heights and weights.’ The authors also mentioned that data on thorough medical check-ups of children already show that ‘more than 70% of children are anaemic, more than 50%-60% have serum Vitamin A levels below the acceptable cut-off level of 20 ug/dl (NNMB 2005), and many have one more vitamin B complex deficiency (Gupta, Patnaik, Singh et al 2013).’ Most importantly, while the authors draw attention, as others have, to markers of social exclusion responsible for India’s malnutrition problem --- the unequal status of women and implementation problems in social programmes which prevent poor families from accessing food, to name two – they highlight the discrete linkages between hunger and malnutrition, characterized by the poor’s inability to access the range of nutrients and calories from the diverse range of foods required to live a healthy life. ‘Nutrient deficiencies very rarely exist in isolation. The only solution is to make sure that people get their calories and proteins from diverse sources (or all the food groups) – cereals such as rice, wheat and millets, pulses, oils, potatoes, fruits such as bananas, fresh vegetables, milk, eggs, nuts, meat, and so on (Gupta et al 2013).’

Also while infected water and open defecation are important causes for malnutrition, they are not the only contributory factors. Malnutrition begins at birth, or even before. However, it intensifies sharply between the ages of six months and three years. Hence, the first 1000 days of a child’s life are very crucial, as the damage done by malnutrition which sets in at this age is often irreversible. Nutritional interventions in this age group are most required to ensure adequate growth, cognitive development and good health. This is the period of most rapid development when the blood is formed, the neural channels of the brain are sculpted and the personality is shaped. Exclusive breastfeeding is recommended for children up to six months of age. Beyond this period, mother’s milk alone is not sufficient for the growing child. In the first 1000 days of a child’s life, the child is also still helpless as she cannot feed herself, or ask for more. A child is also prone to more infections in this period. A child at this age needs frequent meals of softened food that only an adult can give, along with continued breastfeeding (Right to Food Campaign, Secretariat 2007a).

For reduced levels of breast-feeding, irrational cultural practices and lack of education of mothers is frequently blamed by scholars and policy makers. Many studies suggest that ‘incorrect’ feeding practices are a common cause of malnutrition amongst infants. Directly or indirectly, studies suggest that they are responsible for more than two thirds of the deaths caused by malnutrition (WHO 2003). Those children who are not breastfed as often as is recommended have a higher chance of becoming malnourished (Roy 2000). Hence, lack of education about nutritious food, correct practices of feeding children, along with clean drinking water and sanitation, and remedial action to be taken in case of infections also contributes to malnutrition (Roy 2000). But a caution with this finding is the suggestion that mothers are themselves somehow responsible for their children’s malnutrition, because they fail to breast-feed them. This neglects the reality of most poor working mothers in the unorganised sector: in the absence of maternity benefits, they are forced to go out to work even when the child is a small infant. In these circumstances, no amount of ‘education’ about breast-feeding will still allow these mothers to exclusively breast- feed their children. What is forgotten is that impoverished mothers often have to labour even just before and after pregnancy at work-sites without crèches or child-care services. It is for this reason, and not irrationality, that they are unable to breast-feed the infant, and have to leave them to the care of older siblings, sometimes as young as four to five years of age – young children who are in need of care themselves. These small children feed the infants in unsanitary conditions and with infected food and water. We need to recognise that many mothers are unable to take adequate care of their child as they are deprived of adequate time, energy, resources, power and knowledge. Many of them have to work to earn a livelihood and to juggle this with other tasks such as cooking, fetching water, cleaning etc. Therefore just as advocates of

agricultural regeneration and sanitation may claim that they have the ‘real’ answer to the puzzle of malnutrition in India, it is equally reasonable for breast-feeding missionaries to claim that promoting and supporting breast-feeding and early child-care will do more than anything else to reduce malnutrition, and therefore nutrition counselling, universal maternity entitlements and crèche and child-care services are the missing key in the puzzle of ending malnutrition. We repeat once again – the chorus of our paper - that they are right, but all *incompletely* right.

The toll taken by repeated infections is higher because of very poor public health services, which must also be understood as a major contributing factor to malnourishment. Public expenditure on health, at just 1.2 per cent of India’s GDP, is much lower than by a third of the average of 2.8 per cent in low and middle-income countries, and even far lower than industrialised countries. Public health expenditure would benefit the poor – who carry a much higher burden of disease due to poor nutrition, water, sanitation and housing - if it focused on preventive, promotional and primary curative health care, which are starved of resources. Even this low public expenditure is mostly on tertiary care, of which the poor are not major beneficiaries. An estimated 87 of total health financing is private financing, much of is out-of-pocket payments (user charges), most of all on medicines (Economic Research Foundation, 2006).

In summary, it is clear that because of the extremely high incidence of malnutrition in India, it is imperative for the country to focus not just food security, but also nutrition security, which comprises access to adequate amounts of nutritious food, clean drinking water, sanitation, maternity support, child-care services, and public health care. But while each of these interventions are vital, they do not exclude the need for simultaneous action on other fronts as well.

### **Body-Part Four: Poverty and Social Discrimination**

Unravelling in a dark room the ‘elephant’ of hunger and malnutrition in India, so far we have an understanding of many key ‘body-parts’, both causal and from these pointers to policy action. But even the many diverse causes of hunger and malnutrition discussed in the three earlier sections are still only the more direct and immediate ones. If one starts to reflect on what leads to inadequate access to sufficient quantities of nutritious food, clean water, sanitation, healthcare and child-care services, the answers would lie in structural problems related to political priorities and power, poverty, unemployment, and caste, communal and gender discrimination.

Let us begin with the problems of poverty, linked to too few or the complete lack of productive assets (except labour-power), uncertain, low-paid and unprotected work, and lack of adequate and comprehensive social protection for those unable to work. The obvious, often forgotten fact, is that people go hungry most of all because they are desperately impoverished and either unemployed or inadequately employed. There are 269 million people below the extremely low official poverty line, which we believe is actually a starvation line. Significant numbers of households in rural India are landless or have unviable small or marginal rain-fed holdings. Other rural poor households include nomads, livestock rearers, fisher-folk and artisans. At the margins of even these communities are people of stigmatised castes, bonded and child workers, the uncared aged, the disabled and single women and their dependents. Migrants to cities are also trapped in low-end, low-paid and casualised work, as daily wagers, rag-pickers, rickshaw –pullers and domestic workers. It was expected that the period of rapid economic growth would yield both wealth and jobs. But the evidence is that the period of high growth has been one also of nearly jobless growth, and the employment that is generated is largely contract-based and casual, with reliance also on home-based work which disguises child labour and denials of minimum wages. India has a plethora of more than 200 labour laws, but these are defied openly, routinely and with impunity, resulting in the exclusion of people from their right to decent work.

It is possible to argue that India's enigma of widespread hunger in the era of high growth can be explained substantially by the failures both of the growth strategy and the regulatory regimes to ensure decent work for all, assured employment at legal wages. If households lack sufficient food, clean drinking water, sanitation, decent housing, access to health-care and good-quality education, one paramount reason is simply because they are poor and poorly employed. If women were less poor, they could rest and eat well during pregnancy, access institutional health care, stay at home to exclusively breast-feed the child, afford child care when she goes back to work, feed and send her children to school instead of work. It is possible to make the case for yet one more convincing 'silver bullet' to end hunger and malnutrition, which is to ensure decent work for all, combined with adequate social protection for those outside work.

Hunger and malnutrition do not just have a straight link with poverty and unemployment. In the last twenty five years, for instance, absolute poverty in India (using the official and in our opinion minimalist definitions of poverty) has nearly halved from 50 to 60 per cent yet nearly half of all Indian children still remain underweight and about half suffer from anemia (Nagaraj 2013). The reforms in the 1990s are often credited for India's emergence as a contending global economic power. Yet, in the last 20 years the government invested very little in agriculture – about 6% of GDP as of 2009-10 – which is the sector in which most people in the country find employment. As we have mentioned in this paper, most of India's poor are small and landless farmers, and the relative neglect of agriculture, over time, has resulted in these people earning comparatively less than they did 20 years ago (Chandrasekhar 2012). In the absence of a well-functioning social protection system that includes a dependable food distribution system, poor agricultural labourers have been hurt by rising food prices. Between 2008 and 2010, for instance, C.P. Chandrasekhar showed that rice prices rose by nearly half in northern cities and more than half in southern cities while government surveys on food consumption showed that from 1994 to 2010 the poor spent more of their monthly expenses on food, but consumed less of it (Chandrasekhar 2012).

Still another factor for hunger amongst poor, marginalized groups is discrimination. Let us consider the case of gender-based discrimination. One of the consequences of the unequal status of women, both in the larger society and within families, is their inability to access adequate nutritious food, education, health-care, clean drinking water and sanitation required for their nutrition security. Their nutritional vulnerability is enhanced because pregnant and lactating women have enhanced nutrition requirements because of their physiological conditions and single women are much more food insecure than their married counterparts, because of their extremely low status in society. It is not surprising that the proportion of anaemia among women in the age-group 15-49 years was more than double that of men in 2004-05.

Women's food denials are more ironical because they play a crucial role in guaranteeing their families' nutrition security. Studies show that those women who work outside the home are more likely to spend a greater part of their income on the family's nutrition than men (Haddad, Hoddinott and Alderman 1997). In 1980, the UN Women's Conference in Copenhagen stated that although women constitute 50 per cent of the world's population, they own only 1 per cent of the world's resources (United Nations 1980). Because of the various forms of discrimination faced by females, such as those within the family, in owning land and other means of production and in accessing livelihood opportunities, a large proportion of women and girls are highly vulnerable to food insecurity (Krishnaraj 2005). Women and girls also face barriers relative to their male relatives in accessing education, healthcare, clean drinking water and sanitation. In families where food is scarce, women and girls often not only get less food to eat, but may also be forced to eat food which is inferior in quality and nutrient content (Mukherjee and Mukherjee 1994; IFPRI, Bangladesh Institute for Development Studies and the Institute of Nutrition and Food Science 1998; Choudhury and Parthasarathy). Studies also observe a growing trend of 'feminisation of poverty': not just is there higher incidence of poverty amongst women than men, but the *severity* of poverty is also higher

amongst women (Supreme Court Commissioners 2008). Out of 1.3 billion people considered to be living in poverty worldwide, over 70 per cent are believed to be women<sup>10</sup>.

Besides direct discrimination against members of vulnerable groups, there are complex forms of exclusion of such groups – on the basis of gender, caste, tribe and religious identity – from access to basic rights and services that lead to poor group health and nutrition outcomes relative to the rest of the population. In a sense, the Supreme Court's decision in 2001 to make rights to food operational through the existing social protection system, after evidence of starvation deaths across rural India had taken place, may be viewed as an early pathway to addressing social inequalities that lead to hunger. But as the Orders were not backed by legislation and state compliance was in many cases slow and reluctant, the governance of these programmes – especially with respect to vulnerable communities – remained a problem. We will discuss the issue of governance in the food security system with respect to vulnerable groups later in this section.

There is considerable evidence that the burdens of poverty, and its consequences including of poor nutrition, are borne disproportionately by dalit or Scheduled Caste (SC), tribal or Scheduled Tribe (ST) and Muslim households. Several scholars have found a close relationship between SC, ST and Muslim identities and the incidence of malnutrition. Mamgain and Diwakar (2012) collate many studies such as Thorat and Sabharwal (2011), Sabharwal (2011), Baru *et al.* (2010), Baraik and Kulkarni (2006) and Roy *et al.* (2004) which establish that the incidence of malnutrition is significantly higher among poor households, mothers of children without any education and those belonging to SC and ST social groups. Thorat and Sabharwal (2011) find that malnutrition is higher among STs (56.1 per cent) and SCs (50.6 per cent) than 'others' (36.3 per cent). Sabharwal (2011) finds further that SC children are at least 1.4 times more in danger of being malnourished than of children belonging to other social groups.

The Human Development Report 2011<sup>11</sup> conclusively suggests that SCs and STs have a higher percentage of women with BMI less than 18.5 and are also diverging from the national average in terms of female malnutrition; among the industrial states, Gujarat has a very high incidence of malnutrition among SC and ST women; more than 50 per cent of the ST children are underweight and stunted and more than 75 per cent of the ST children have anaemia. Further, Muslim populated states have a higher percentage of children suffering from anaemia. While the situation of adult malnutrition is similar for the religious communities of Hindus and Muslims, the percentage of Muslim women with BMI<18.5 is increasing, while the same for Hindus is decreasing. Bihar recorded the highest incidence of women's malnutrition and Orissa recorded the highest for Muslim women. Hindus recorded the highest percentage of chronically underweight children followed by Muslims.

The reasons for this close association between membership of SC, ST and Muslim identities, poverty and malnutrition, can be found in the greater social barriers faced by people of these communities in owning and retaining land and other productive assets (especially forest in the context of STs), in accessing employment in non-stigmatised, safe and relatively well-paid occupations, and in accessing formal credit. For Muslims, it is the 'development deficits' that a majority of them face that underscores their poverty and state of malnutrition. The landmark Sachar Committee Report in 2006 drew attention to the extent of deprivation Muslim communities encounter in all aspects of development- education, livelihood and access to public services, such as power, piped water supply and sewerage. It found worryingly low enrolments and high drop-outs (amidst popular aspirations of Muslims of every class and gender for education), high prevalence of home-based work and extremely low incomes; and discrimination faced by young Muslim men and women in government

<sup>10</sup> ([http://www.fao.org/waicent/ois/press\\_ne/presseng/h5f.htm](http://www.fao.org/waicent/ois/press_ne/presseng/h5f.htm))

<sup>11</sup> India, OUP (2011). *India Human Development Report 'The Right to Food and Nutrition'*. India: Oxford University Press.

as well as private recruitment, resulting in widespread unemployment (Centre for Equity Studies et al 2011).

Comparing the extent of deprivation amongst vulnerable groups in comparison to others, a 2012 World Bank study showed that the decline in the overall poverty rate of Scheduled Tribes of 31 percent in the twenty year period between 1983-84 to 2004-05 is still behind the all-India decline of 40 percent as well as other vulnerable groups, such as Scheduled Castes, who experienced a 35 percent decline (World Bank 2012). The starkest marker of ST deprivation, however, is the high rate of child mortality in this group. 96 percent of tribal children per every 1,000 births die before their fifth birthday, compared to 74 deaths per every 1,000 children in India overall. The World Bank study shows that the risk factors for child deaths are access to health services, the populations' geographic isolation, and their high risks of malnutrition. Tribal children fare worse on all nutrition indicators in comparisons to the already abysmal all-India averages, including the number of children that are underweight. A 2005 study cited by the World Bank surveyed tribal populations in two states and reported that "99 percent of tribal households faced chronic hunger, one-quarter had faced semi-starvation during the previous week." (World Bank 2012).

The barriers to owning and accessing productive assets and remunerative work faced by these vulnerable communities come in the way of the first two ways that a household can access food with dignity: namely growing one's food requirements (or collecting these from forests, rivers or the seas); or earning enough to purchase this food. These also are barriers in accessing the other key requirements of nutrition: clean water, sanitary environments, health-care and education. These socially discriminated identities are in addition barriers to the third way that households can theoretically access food: by government food provisioning.

The barriers faced by these groups also extend to accessing government institutions and services. The 2006 report of perhaps the first and largest national survey of the continued prevalence of untouchability, jointly authored by Ghanshyam Shah, Sukhadeo Thorat, Satish Deshpande, Amita Baviskar and one of the authors of this paper, finds untouchability a social barrier for SCs in all local state institutions. A shocking 27.6 per cent dalits are prevented from entering police stations and 25.7 from ration shops. 33 per cent public health workers refuse to visit dalit homes, and 23.5 per cent dalits still do not get letters delivered to their homes. Segregated seating for dalits was found in 30.8 self-help groups and cooperatives, and 29.6 per cent panchayat offices. In 14.4 per cent villages, dalits were not permitted even to enter the panchayat building. They were denied access to polling booths, or forced to form separate lines in 12 per cent of the villages surveyed. Despite being charged with a Constitutional mandate to promote social justice, various local institutions of the Indian state clearly tolerate and even facilitate the practice of untouchability (Mander 2006).

A number of studies map a series of discriminatory and exclusionary practices in ICDS and school meal programmes, against children from disadvantaged groups (Thorat and Lee 2005, Ramchandran 2005, Mander and Kumaran 2006, Jan Sahas 2009, Thorat and Lee 2010, IIDS-UNICEF 2012, Mangain and Diwakar 2012, Swain and Kumaran 2012). These include separate seating and separate plates. This discrimination was also found to extend to service providers from these communities. One of the authors of this paper found in an extensive field study in four states (Mander and Kumaran 2006) various forms of exclusion: geographic by locating the services in habitations in which low-caste children do not feel welcomed, social by ill-treatment and humiliation of children from disadvantaged communities, and economic such as the pressures of working women to not be able to carry the children to the centre and the unwillingness of ICDS staff to fetch these children. Ghanshyam Shah *et al* 2006 have also documented discriminatory practices in the PDS. Swain and Kumaran chronicled the list of reasons given by the Planning Commission (2005), the Wadhwa Commission (2009) and the Supreme Court Commissioners' Office for malfunctioning of programmes based on discrimination, which include poor monitoring systems leading to leakages, corruption caused by elite control over service delivery, and most importantly, direct discrimination against people on the basis of caste, gender, and religion (Swain and Kumaran 2012).

There is in addition to these broad categories of the poor, and of groups disadvantaged by gender, caste and religious identity, the special need to recognise for special policy focus the most marginalised categories of people within these who are at all or most times most vulnerable to the danger of imminent hunger. These are paradoxically also groups which tend to be forgotten in public provisioning and even political organisation.

In India the Supreme Court Commissioners in the Right to Food Case submitted a special report that focuses on the most vulnerable groups of the populations, recommending by way of identification as follows: 'a) place of residence and access to public services: (shelterless, unauthorized slum dwellers, authorized slum dwellers and residents of resettlement colonies); b) social vulnerability: children without protection and child headed households, single women and single women headed households, disabled people and family with PWD (persons with disabilities), old people without care givers, people in destitution; c) vulnerable occupational categories: such as rag pickers, casual daily wage workers, rickshaw pullers, porters, construction workers, street vendors, domestic helpers etc; and d) affirmative action categories: Scheduled Castes/ Scheduled Tribes, Muslims' (Supreme Court Commissioners 2008).

Earlier sections on food security and food sovereignty highlighted critiques of the adverse impacts agricultural policies and liberalization has had on the food producers' access to farm inputs, natural resources, and public investment required to both grow enough food for local consumption and sustainable livelihoods from food production, vis-à-vis the assured access to markets. The impacts of social exclusion and discrimination against vulnerable groups to food and nutrition programmes in this section raises the question of governance of social protection policies -- particularly those backed by human rights, like programmes under the ambit of the Supreme Court Orders on the Right to Food and the recently passed National Food Security Act. The major question pertaining to both of these legal pathways is how to ensure a system of governance in social protection programmes in consideration of deprivations faced by people too impoverished or compromised by malnutrition? It is important not only to consider vulnerable groups across social categories -- such as STs, SCs, and Muslims -- but, on a more granular level, people within and outside these communities who have neither the means of producing their own food or earning income from a sustainable livelihood to buy it from the marketplace -- or even at subsidised rates from government programmes -- such as the elderly, small children, and the disabled. The National Food Security Act could have provided an opportunity for lawmakers to improve governance of the social programmes like the PDS and ICDS by including systems of identifying people vulnerable to calamities resulting from hunger and malnutrition as well as punitive measures in a system of grievance mechanisms for cases of in which poor peoples' right of access to such programmes are violated. The National Advisory Council, a body of social and economic policy experts who advised Prime Minister Singh on public policies (of which one of the writers was a member at that time), suggested a 'starvation protocol' as a measure to investigate and identify cases of severe hunger and starvation and providing immediate access to the PDS and ICDS. The protocol was not accepted by legislators in the final drafting of the bill. On the matter of punitive measures, the National Food Security Act has in place grievance redressal bodies at the district and state levels, with mandates on officers to '(1) place all PDS-related records in the public domain; (2) conduct periodic social audits of the PDS and other welfare schemes; (3) use information and communication technology to "ensure transparent recording of transactions at all levels"; (4) set up vigilance committees at all levels to supervise all schemes under the Act.'

The FAO recognises the need to specially focus on some of these groups: 'All individuals have an equal right to food, but people's differing circumstances mean that different actions are required of the government in order for that right to be realized for all. Thus, ensuring the right to food of those who are affected by conflicts and other disasters often requires special protection and support measures. Exactly the same is true for groups who are marginalized or vulnerable because of inequalities and other structural factors within a society...(FAO 2006)'. Golay and Ozden (undated) equally affirm that while the right to food is universal, it must first and foremost be safeguarded for the most vulnerable populations around the world, such as those suffering from discrimination, women and children, landless rural workers, indigenous peoples and tribes, slum dwellers, the

unemployed and others (Golay and Ozden). The Human Rights Council in its report on discrimination of 2010 states that strategies addressing discrimination, including with respect to the right to food, ought to take a vulnerable and disadvantaged groups approach. Eliminating discrimination in practice requires paying sufficient attention to groups of individuals who suffer historical or persistent prejudice instead of merely comparing the formal treatment of individuals in similar situations (Human Rights Council 2010).

## **Body-Part Five: State Provisioning of Food**

We return here once again to the three main ways that a household may access sufficient food: by growing it, by earning the money for it, or by state provisioning. The last section established that inequalities and discrimination based on gender, class, caste, ethnicity and religion act as formidable barriers to all these forms of accessing sufficient food with dignity. For the rest, in the first 3 sections, we have so far looked mainly at failures in the first two ways of feeding oneself, and also the consequences of eating enough food but falling prey to infections due to insanitary conditions of water and defecation, or the lack of health care. In this section, we will turn to state duties to provision food to people insufficiently able to feed themselves.

The state may provision food in many ways: by subsidising raw food such as through ration shops or cooked food through soup kitchens; by free meals such as in schools, small child feeding centres or destitute feeding; by public employment works; or by cash transfers, such as welfare doles, pensions for the aged and disabled, and maternity benefits. The Indian government has long provisioned food in many of these ways: through PDS ration shops, school meals and ICDS feeding centres for children below 6 years, public employment works and old age pensions. But until recently none of these – except the public employment programme – were guaranteed by law. This has changed firstly by a series of rulings by India's Supreme Court, then by the passage of the National Food Security Act (on 26 August 2013), India's first ever right to food legislation.

The years between the Indian Supreme Court's conversion of eight public food, nutrition, and work programmes into 'rights to food' in 2001 and Parliament's passage of the National Food Security Act in 2013, brought forth diverse and vigorous debates on pathways in law and policy for ensuring sufficient food and nutrition for all children, women and men in the country. The federal UPA government's promise to pass food security legislation upon re-election in 2009 symbolised an acknowledgment by policy makers, scholars and activists that the glaring paradox framing the context of hunger in India could no longer be ignored: despite decades-long achievement in surplus food production, as well as record economic growth during UPA-I's tenure, India held the perverse distinction of being home to over 200 million hungry people<sup>12</sup>. A segment of policymakers and scholars could at least agree that India's hunger problem should be assessed and contended with in view of problems facing poor people in their access to sufficient food, rather than just issues of production alone. The road to such an understanding was set in motion by evidence provided to the Courts in 2001 of starvation deaths in Rajasthan and at a time when government grain silos held over 50 million tonnes in reserve and public food, nutrition, and work programmes were found to be defunct. The National Food Security Act addressed a major part of food access by ensuring the right of 66% of Indians (75% rural India and 50% urban India) subsidized grains from government fair price shops, entitlements to children below the age of 6 and pregnant and lactating mothers to free meals through local anganwadis, and school age children a mid-day meal, and pregnant. Yet, the provisions of the bill as well the context behind hunger and malnutrition in India that led to its drafting and passage was met with criticism from many proponents of food security. These debates, rooted in food security, food sovereignty, nutrition, the linkages between poverty and social exclusion

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<sup>12</sup> An illustration of antagonistic debates is the controversial, ad hominem clash between renowned economists, Amartya Sen and Jagdish Bhagwati, in July-August 2013. We refer to this later in the paper.

and hunger, and the merits of the state provisioning of food were both robust and divisive, and are the subject of earlier sections of the paper. There were also disagreements and debates about the content and mechanisms for state food provisioning.

Public opinion in India is deeply divided about the merits of this law which guarantees public provisioning of food by the state. One set of commentators – which include the writers of this paper - cautiously view it as a long-delayed though beneficial, potentially historic statute: for the first time legal duties on the state are in place which guarantees large populations of hungry and malnourished people access to food. Still, the concern is that the law does not go far enough: it is not universal, neglects agriculture, does not include provisions for the starving and destitute, and ignores cohering dimensions of food and nutritional security, such as water, sanitation and health care. It also fails to establish a robust and independent enforcement mechanism critical for the implementation of any rights-based law.

Many other proponents of food security, however, are profoundly dismayed by the law. For instance, Devendra Sharma, a prominent writer on agriculture and food security, calls for dismantling the PDS. He declares, ‘Extending the same failed PDS to more families, or introducing a revamped PDS is ... unlikely to make any meaningful difference to the plight of the hungry and malnourished.’ ‘The question that needs to be asked,’ he says, ‘is whether hunger will be removed if the food entitlement is raised from 25 kilos to 35 kilos? Will hunger disappear if the destitute and disabled and the homeless are also included in the list? The answer is a big NO.’ We believe on the contrary that the inclusion of the destitute and homeless in the PDS (and in other food provisioning programmes like community kitchens) is significant in addressing their hunger today, but are not in themselves basic solutions to their hunger.

A complete disavowal of the public distribution of food neglects findings on both the government’s capacity to provide resources to support such a programme as well as the impacts the current system has had on increasing food access to the poor. In the run up to the passage of the bill, the government raised concern over expanding the PDS on the basis that India can’t produce enough food to meet demand. N.C. Saxena showed, however, that India needs to hold 50 million tons of grain to feed 180 million families (the number of families covered under the expanded PDS). India procured nearly 65 million tons each year between 2010 and 2012, and as of June 2012, held a record 80 million tons of food grains in public stock. Meanwhile, Jean Dreze and Reetika Khera conducted a series of longitudinal studies on the impact of the PDS on poverty reduction in food secure regions such Bihar, Orissa, and Chattisgarh and showed that purchases from the public food system increased by 50% between 2004-05 and 2009-10, because states like Andhra Pradesh, Chhatisgarh, Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu made access to cheap grains universal out of their own budgets.

This paper will not dwell on the merits and failures of the specific food law passed by India’s Parliament. It will restrict itself to the debates about whether the state should indeed provision food to the hungry and malnourished.

The case in favour of public provisioning of food to children and households which are food and nutritionally insecure centres firstly on India’s Constitution, and Supreme Court rulings which expand the fundamental right to life with dignity to include the right to food and all that is necessary to make such a life possible. One of the writers of this paper has separately described the decade long case in the Supreme Court which affirmed and explicated the right to food through over a hundred court rulings, and an independent mechanism of Supreme Court Commissioners (Mander 2012a, 2012 b). There are also developments in the international framework of human rights, reflected in a series of international covenants, which recommend a legally enforceable right to food, and a scaffolding of social protection for all persons.

But also there are pressing moral and practical grounds cited in favour of food provisioning in the context of India’s failure to end hunger and malnutrition, even as growth creates unprecedented wealth and the agricultural revolution in the decades after Independence ensures that country produces enough food to feed all persons. As Varshney (2013) points out, ‘India has the fifth largest

concentration of listed dollar billionaires (after the US, Russia, China and Germany); the third largest middle class (after China and the US); the single largest concentration of the poor'. That every malnourished child in the world is Indian should be morally – and politically – unacceptable. Varshney, urging us to consider the 'costs of no food security, asks: How long can a poor democracy fail to be a welfare state?'

One argument raised by most critics of the food law is that 'doles' by the government are no answer to hunger and malnutrition. We have already in this paper heard critics who fear that this will create dependencies, and divert attention from the urgent need variously to revive an ecologically sustainable agriculture, or ensure universal sanitation and drinking water. We would add at this stage of the paper a number of further policy imperatives also required to ensure food for all, including ensuring decent work for all, land reforms, programmes for gender, caste and communal equity, crèches and child care services, universal maternity entitlements, universal health care, among others.

Our point is that we fully agree that action is needed on all these fronts: much has been accomplished on many of these, but not enough and a great deal remains to be done. As long as we fail on any of these diverse imperatives, hunger and poor nutrition will remain. Millions of people in the meanwhile will be trapped to live with the consequences of these failures; with weakened bodies and minds, easy prey to infection and even disease mortality, and the enormous suffering of living with hunger (Mander 2012). It is not our claim that provisioning of food by the state is an *answer* to the problems of hunger and malnutrition. It is not. But it is an essential means to mitigate the enormous human, social and economic consequences of what Dreze (2003) describes as 'the catastrophic nature of the nutritional situation in India'. These are not doles; they are essential even if admittedly shorter-term essential medicines of public policy to enable people to survive without avoidable suffering and loss of productivity even as we work to achieve permanent solutions. There is no disagreement that for poverty to end, far more needs to be done than simply feeding people. But while all of this is being done, the child's brain and body is forming today, and it is the duty of a caring state especially in a rapidly growing economy to ensure that while more lasting solutions are crafted and implemented, people today do not suffer from preventable hunger.

Some critics believe that economic growth is the solution to poverty, not food provisioning. The Sen-Bhagwati debate pertains to state provisioning versus a growth led approach. At the heart of the Sen-Bhagwati ad hominem argumentation (that was provided undue oxygen by the media) was the critical debate about their radically different approaches to tackling India's current poverty and nutrition challenges. A champion of globalisation and free trade, Bhagwati opposes state subsidisation in the hope that the rising tide of economic growth will help overcome poverty, while Sen chiefly argues in support of state provisioning as a necessary redistributive measure to provide basic services to the poor, who, one may say, have been cast ashore and marginalised by this rising tide of market-led growth. And Varshney strikes a middle-ground by saying that pursuing the two paths, of welfareism and economic growth, is necessary and inevitable in the context of India. Neither Sen nor the authors of this paper would disagree.

Most of the criticisms of India's food security law focus on the PDS segment of the law which guarantees extremely cheap rice, wheat and millets to 66 per cent of the population. They do not comment on many equally significant elements of this law, such as near-universal maternity entitlements, universal feeding for young children, and universal school meals in government and government-aided schools. Their criticisms of an expanded PDS are sweeping but sometimes substantial and searching, and in any case deserve careful consideration. Sadanand Dhume (2013) witheringly describes India's food law as akin to 'something cooked up by a Soviet planner on a bad day... created by a gaggle of leftist intellectuals who never encountered a government hand-out they didn't like'. But Haddad *et al.* (2012) welcome the food law, believing that with it 'India stands on the threshold of potentially the largest step toward food justice the world has ever seen...because Indian food security and nutrition levels are not being swept up in the tide of gross domestic product per capita growth – they remain rooted to the seabed'. Varshney (2013) affirms that social and food

protection is not a substitute for market growth but its essential complement: ‘India is moving towards a rights-based conception of development, along with the promotion of market forces. It is not one or the other. This two-legged approach is not only desirable, but also more or less inevitable. The hunger and emaciation that one sees all around is embarrassing and must go down. It is also hurting economic growth. Markets can ignore the hungry, but poor democracies cannot do so beyond a point. India's democracy appears to be reaching that point. Food security is the price India's rising capitalism might have to pay for functioning in a low-income democracy’. He adds: ‘Democratic politics cannot easily be envisioned without the idea of winning power’ and expanding political (or regime) legitimacy through welfare policies has historically been a part and parcel of democratic politics.

Those who worry that the law is wasteful and populist suggest that this scale of public money would far better be invested in public infrastructure, education and health-care than distributing cheap food to large populations. Gurcharan Das feels not only that cheap food would disincentivise work, but that the money which will go into financing the food provisioning guaranteed by the law could have been far better ‘spent in providing public goods--roads, schools, power, and law and order--it would ... encourage entrepreneurs to start businesses, which would create sustainable jobs and raise the state's tax revenues. These taxes, in turn, would make it possible to invest in more public goods. Thus, a virtuous circle would be created and lift the society's standard of living’. But we believe that spending on food is not a populist dole but an investment in India's greatest economic resource: its vast young population in the productive age-group, imperative for consolidating the gains of India's demographic dividend. Every second child in India is malnourished, which means that the brains and bodies of every second young adult are not developed to their full potential. Again quoting Varshney (2013), ‘The bottom third of India does not get enough calories per day...Being underfed, the bottom third is also routinely sick. The hungry and the sick can't be productive workers, even if they want to. Markets can't help them all that much. The poor, if fed or nourished better, also do better in the marketplace. They lift themselves and contribute to society’. Sabina Alkire (2013) argues: ‘Across the political spectrum in Asia, which in general has much lower rates of malnutrition than India, governments invest more in social protection. Perhaps parties of many stripes recognise that healthy workers with strong bodies and brains are essential for sustained economic growth — as well as human development.’

Then there are those whose unease stems from the high costs of the food law: an estimated annual burden of one and a quarter lakh crore rupees, they argue, is profligate, and will inflate deficits and fuel inflation. Firstly, what is relevant is not the total but the marginal increase in public expenditure that the food law entails. This is 25,000 crore rupees, which seems a more reasonable expansion if we are convinced that what the law offers is a useful public investment. Secondly, we can manage public deficits if we are willing to tax more. As Sabina Alkire (2013) notes, ‘These dire warnings (of unaffordability) seem to overlook the fact that additional expenditures can be offset by cuts elsewhere. It is, as always, a question of priorities.’

India's tax to GDP ratio is lower than most industrialized market economies, and it relies excessively on indirect taxes rather than direct, which burdens the poor disproportionately. India also gives tax holidays amounting to over 5 lakh crore rupees every year to the corporate sector, and this is justified as necessary for wealth and job creation. But the overwhelming evidence from the high growth years is that this has been a period of virtually jobless growth, which underlines that there is no substitute for public investment to enhance livelihoods. There is need also to enhance the integrity of India's tax efforts.

All of this suggests that there is considerable scope for taxing the rich to ensure investments in the nutrition, health and education of the working poor. And finally, we need to weigh the costs of *not* making these investments, the enormous costs of hunger, preventable diseases and deaths on the morale and productivity of several hundred million working people and growing children. Sabina Alkire (2013) offers a telling global comparison. In lower middle income countries, expenditures (on social insurance, social assistance, and labour market programmes), are, on average, 3.4 per cent of

GDP. India's is a mere half of that at 1.7 per cent, and even this low level is reached largely because of MGNREGA, not existing food security costs. The average for upper middle income countries is 4 per cent of GDP, and high income countries 10.2 per cent. Japan spends 19.2 per cent and China 5.4 per cent. Even Singapore spends more than twice as much as India, at 3.5 per cent of GDP. She adds: 'India has a higher proportion of stunted children than nearly any other country on earth, yet spends half the proportion of GDP that lower middle income Asian countries spend on social protection and less than one-fifth of what high income countries in Asia spend. The costs of NFSB are not the making of a nanny state'.

The third cluster of criticisms of the food security law is that it is not implementable, that state administrations demonstrably lack the capacity to actually deliver the promises of the law, evidenced by even official studies which confirm enormous leakages of subsidised PDS grains into the black market. There is no doubt that runaway corruption and inefficiencies greatly cripple state's capacity. But it is important to remember that both corruption and its debilitating impacts on governance are not restricted to programmes for the poor. They apply also to defence deals, for instance, or to urban infrastructure development (as the CWG Games scandal demonstrated), or to the allocation of natural resources like coal mines. But it is no one's case that because of corruption, we should place an embargo on defence purchases, or on developing our cities, or on mining coal. Then why should we selectively apply corruption as a reason to veto investing public resources only for programmes for the poor?

It is hoped that the pressures created by the food security law, and democratic mobilisation around it, will place pressure for incremental improvements in the PDS over time in all states, in the way that the MG NREGA, RTE and RTI laws have done. It can be no one's case that states are still fully geared up to deliver the rights to work, education or transparent governance, but the creation of legal rights by statutes generated unprecedented pressure on and central and state administrations to greatly improve their delivery systems over time. The same can reasonably be expected to happen with regard to the right to food. The experience of states as diverse as Chhatisgarh and Tamil Nadu demonstrates that, given political will, the leaky and creaky PDS can be credibly fixed. Legal rights create a normative framework of what people should rightfully expect from their governments, and it enhances expectations, and through it democratic pressures for change.

The enormous reservoirs of continued preventable suffering of millions of the poor should convince even those convinced about the efficacy of markets to ultimately end poverty that at least in the medium term, there is no substitute for large state investments to ensure that all people have work, food, education and health-care.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, we acknowledge that hunger and malnourishment cannot end until the other range of deficits and challenges outlined in all the streams described above are not adequately combatted. In other words, there is little hope for the end of hunger until India's small farm sector is protected and revived, until sustainable technologies are advanced, until there is universal clean water, sanitation and health care; until decent work for all is ensured; until social protection, maternity entitlements and child care services are universally available; and above all until the gendered, social and class based inequalities of one of the most historically unequal societies in the world are at least partly overcome.

Many of these battles are underway, but most need much greater strength, energy, imagination and political will, as well as adequate resourcing. But what happens in the meanwhile to children whose brains and bodies are being formed today, to people who sleep hungry today? Do we ask them to wait decades, maybe centuries longer, until their hunger ends? The greatest suffering on the planet today is caused by hunger, disease and hate. Famines have receded in most parts of the planet, but not endemic

hunger and malnourishment. In the end of this paper, we try to build not just an economic but also a democratic and an ethical case for guaranteeing public provisioning of food through the instrument of a right to food law, requiring states to provision food to people denied it. In doing so, we made no claim at all that this presents a final or complete solution to hunger: it does not. But still we are convinced that in a world of plenty, ending the intense and preventable suffering associated with hunger and malnourishment is a foremost moral duty of people and governments the world over.

The fable with which we started this essay has a Sufi version as well, retold by the great 13<sup>th</sup> century Persian Sufi poet and teacher Rumi as 'The Elephant in the Dark'. He writes of sighted men in a dark room trying to understand what an elephant imported from India looks like. He ends his poem with the words: 'If each had a candle and they went in together, the differences would disappear.'