

FACTS against MYTHS

Manufacturing Hunger and Starvation? The Myths behind Underproduction and Food Scarcity

- “If the history of British rule in India were to be condensed to a single fact, it is this: there was no increase in India’s per-capita income from 1757 to 1947” – Mike Davis Late Victorian Holocausts; *El Nino Famines and the Making of the Third World*, Verso Books, London, 2001
- “...There is no shortage of reminders of the terrible condition of the “common man”...the countries at the top of every economic and social index in the world are closely identified with high-quality education, public health and nutrition. The nation should stop fooling itself! The delusion that India is an aspirant to be a “global power” is like a donkey dressing itself up, imagining that it is a race horse...” – T.S.R. Subramanian, The Hungry Nation, *Indian Express*, 2.2017
- “Hunger and malnutrition are man-made. They are hardwired in the design of the industrial, chemical model of agriculture. But just as hunger is created by design, healthy and nutritious food for all can also be designed, through food democracy...” – Vandana Shiva, “The Real Hunger Games”, *Asian Age*, August 29,2012

Comment:

For decades, India has prided itself on being a nation sufficient in food production and a food surplus nation. Yet, paradoxically, it continues to fail in effectively addressing the wide disparities between the rich-the super-rich and the mass of impoverished people, in terms of availability of food meant for the sustenance of life. India has the maximum disparities between the rich and poor. Starvation in this context is all the more relevant issue.

The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), Washington, released the 2017 Global Hunger Index (GHI), ranking India 100 among the 119 countries studied. (It does not include most of Industrialized North where the extent of hunger is irrelevant.) Among these countries however India has the lowest improvement rate. Such surveys do give a fair notion of the state of global hunger.

However, they do not give an objective assessment of peoples’ hunger in a country like India and thus can be misleading. What is relevant though is that hunger is not related as much to the production of food as to access and distribution. “Do the urban poor, who depend predominately on PDS, have the same access as the urban rich? There is also a gender, caste, religious, regional variation in access...” (1). Further, more than the level of hunger and malnutrition, it is the slow progress in solving them despite the rapid growth of the economy. While the index for India has improved from 38.2 in 2000 to 31.4 in 2017 declining by 6.8 points, it has fallen even behind war-ravaged Iraq. Most countries at a level of hunger and malnutrition similar or higher than India have seen a faster decline. During the same period, the corresponding decline for North Korea (12.1), Bangladesh (11.1), (Nepal 14.8), Afghanistan (19.4), Ethiopia (23.7), Rwanda

(24.9) was almost double or more. There are other countries too that have achieved a much faster and better out-come despite growing slower than India. (2) Surveys also indicated that the trends in India with respect to undernourishment, the nutritive value consumed per person are reducing. In 2011 another survey by the Centre for Equity Studies, New Delhi, headed by Harsh Mander reported starvation deaths in Bihar, Jharkhand and M.P.(3) In Jharkhand, on September 28, a 11-year girl Santoshi Kumari died of starvation. In the same month, 3 brothers in Karnataka died in similar circumstances. Santhosi's death was followed by another starvation death on October 20 of a rickshaw puller B. Ravidas in the same State. These deaths highlight the issues of chronic hunger and malnutrition in the country's social welfare system and the government's indifference to the plight of the poor. Despite very high levels of poverty the State of Jharkhand failed to take any safeguard to prevent starvation of the poorest of the poor(4)

Instead of addressing this problem by devising measures to eradicate hunger and starvation, the government is prioritizing a lopsided form of

development that focuses on genetic modified food production as a solution to mass hunger on the one hand and promoting and launching space research programmes in the name of "nation's progress" on the other. However, this achievement will be meaningless in the long run until and unless its people are not guaranteed basic nutrition essential for the maintenance of their life.

Historically, starvation has been a fact of life worldwide; not just in India. Famines occur for a number of reasons like war, family, etc. India as a whole had experienced several famines that killed millions. In the pre-colonial era famines did occur but they much less in frequency. During British colonial rule, for instance, millions died but how many millions actually died due to famines cannot be fully ascertained. The official futures according to colonial rulers indicated it could be 60 m. deaths. In reality, it could be even much higher. The colonial power gives the lie that droughts, the cause for reduced farm production, led to these famines. The British who at the time were engaged in wars in Europe and Africa were exporting Indian food grains to their troops to

Famines in History

Famines in India were quite common. The major famines were during British colonial rule, from 1765 to 1947. These included both in the princely states (administered by Indian rulers), British India (regions ruled by the British MNC, British East Indian Company from 1765 to 1857) and Indian territories independent of British colonial rule such as the Maratha Empire. The year 1765 is chosen as the start because that year the British MNC, after its victory in the Battle of Buxar, was granted the Diwani (rights to land revenue) in the region of Bengal (although it would not directly rule Bengal until 1784 when it was granted the Niazamat or control of law and order).

- The Great Irish Famine (1845 to 1853)
- The Great Indian Famine (1876-1878)
- Vietnam's Famine (1945)
- North Korean Famine (1994-1998)
- Russian Famine (1921)
- Bengal Famine (1943)
- Bengal Famine (1770)
- Soviet Famine (1932-1933)
- Chalisa (North India) Famine (1783-
- Chinese Famine (1907)
- Great Chinese Famine (1932-1933)

maintain their conquests while famines were raging. (5) In 1943, around 4 million people starved to death in Bengal despite the fact that there was no shortage of food supplies in India. At the time, India had even exported 70,000 tons of rice to Britain. Moreover, wheat shipments from Australia had passed along the India's coast but prevented from it being off-loaded to feed the starving people!

Above all, the basis for a famine did not exist even during colonial rule. Famines occurred largely owing to alien political intervention, engineered by the British; and was linked to the undeclared policy to depopulate India with the goal to reduce the Empire's cost of sustaining country.

Incidentally Bengal, under British occupation in 1765 (along with Bihar, Orissa and Bangladesh) at the time, represented close to 25% of the world's GDP while Britain had a merely 2%. They appointed a tax collector and a local administrator through their policy of indirect rule to govern Bengal. This arrangement lasted for a century as more and more Indians got bankrupt that became the basis for future famines. Whist the tax money went into British treasuries, millions of Indians starved to death in Bengal and Bihar.

On Independence, India had from time to time experienced drought in some parts of the country. For that matter few famines had occurred in pre-colonial times. But there was no famine although thousands continue to die annually due to lack of adequate food, faulty food distribution system and lack of sufficient nutrition.

Death due to starvation especially of children was not so much as due to the lack of food as to the callous administration more obsessed in identifying ghost beneficiaries through the forced implementation of biometric identification than providing essential food rations to the needy. “

The objective of public policy, making Aadhaar mandatory even through it is not...” Such attitude has also been noted in other nutrition programmes like the mid-day meal schemes where young children in school have been denied nutritious food in the absence of such an identification. So has been the case with the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) where expectant mothers have been denied benefits legislated by Parliament in the absence

of valid biometric identification. The instances of hunger and starvation deaths, then, is a clear case of an insensitive administration using Aadhaar to deny benefits to the citizens. “Above all, it is a clear reflection of the political priorities of the governments. For the government, life of a human being is certainly less important than a 12-digit number”. (2) The administrative machine is clearly violating the National Food Security Act (NFSA).

Starvation deaths go beyond food. Illiteracy also places these people at a higher risk when the food supply dries up due to the lack of knowledge. Besides, health and medical care are sub-standard in their approach which again impedes the deaths caused by starvation. Furthermore, according to news report in the Indian Express of December 6, 2017, although mortality rate has reduced to half in the past 2 decades, the malnutrition decline remains very slow and this is a health risk in that it can affect intellectual and cognitive ability of children.

The reality above shows a huge disconnect between India's relatively high levels of growth and its low ranks on human development.

The whole question of feeding the poor is a serious concern and also a convenient ploy for the agricultural input corporations like Monsanto to launch and promote their agribusiness paradigm. They maintain that if any other farming system cannot feed the world, it is irrelevant. What is instead relevant is that agribusiness and the food it produces is the solution to global hunger and starvation. This is why they launch the myth of food scarcity, and the *raison d'être* of their existence. They absolutely depend on it, since it alone can camouflage the simplicity of the underlying issues. “As early as the 1940s, the chemical and oil industries sent the Rockefeller Foundation to Mexico to “fix” agriculture there. Despite evidence to the contrary, the Rockefeller scientists derived a now –familiar narrative: Mexican agriculture was obviously gripped by a production deficit that could only be fixed by “modern” agriculture...This story later became the un-contested “truth” that had legitimized the “green revolution”...and still propels the proliferation of pesticides, fertilizers, GMOs and other agribusiness methods...”:

Despite fact and figures showing surplus food, government officials habitually present hunger

and low food production the *raison d'être* of for their techno-fix solution. This mindset is part of a perspective that believes in the Northern style Agro-Business Corporations. The balance sheet of a technological solution is clearly reflected in the so-called Green Revolution – Punjab and Haryana —where the cost of the land and water table, dependent relationship on the financiers and agro-corporations failed to factored in. This model “spelt rapid depletion of the natural capital for farming –soil, water and biodiversity. It also resulted in indebted farmers. It is inexplicable that a set of market economy policy makers, with a commitment to cost benefit analysis, should ignore depletion of basic capital – land that produces, and the (in)security of farmers in the market...”(7)

Close on the heels of this model, is the treadmill of technologies imposed on Indian famers, viz., Genetic Modified (GM) Crops that will impact consumers (food safety) and farmers (livelihood) security. GM crops are controversial worldwide and questions are raised as to why it is being introduced in food and farming. When Bt brinjal was introduced, it was later assessed and declared to be unsatisfactory and the then Union Minister for Environment and Forests contested the decision and declared to enforce an indefinite moratorium on the proposal. While the area under Bt cotton cultivation had risen, data analysis showed productivity did not significantly increase, nor has pesticide-use markedly decline. (7)

In the light of the above, there is need to restore reality to this debate by first unpacking some of the common misconceptions on food relative to the question of hunger and starvation embedded in the deluge of official mis-information and industry propaganda. The task is to first become familiar with the basic facts of the India's food system. Good starting points are “Good Food for Everyone Forever” by Colin Tudge, World Hunger: 12 myths by J. Collins, P. Rosset, F. M. Lapped and How Monsanto Wrote and Broke the Laws to Enter India by Vandana Shiva. Until this is done agricultures' and chemical industry solutions will always be the default winner.

MYTH: To overcome mass hunger and starvation due to food scarcity in India there is the urgent need to raise food production.

FACT: First and foremost, there have never been

food shortages in the world, even in India. India, instead, is endowed with super-abundance food!! For that matter even the US, Australia, New Zealand and Europe are swamped in food. The UK's food production is invested in biofuels and attempts to dispose of surplus food. China is not over abundant with food but continues to export food and grows 30% of the world's cotton. (Only Bangladesh is closest to not being swamped in food)

The false narrative of food scarcity is being peddled by

- MNCs like Monsanto, Cargil, Syngenta, Bayer, among others;
- The US Farm Bureau; the UK National Farmers Union; the American Soybean Association, and CropLife International,
- The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, The Rockefeller Foundation, USAID;
- The International Research System (CGIAR) and even
- NASA (The National Aeronautic and Space Agency)

As arch representatives of the industrial systems of agriculture their propaganda is that global food shortages can only be resolved by agribusiness that can alone feed the exploding population of 10 b. people by 2050!

Given this reality, a number of establishment institutions are now forced to admit that the very concept of food shortage is thus a bankrupt term. According to food experts there is already sufficient food production for 14 b. people – more food than will ever be needed!

Lest it be overlooked,

- Granaries s are bulging, crops are being burned as biofuels or dumped, prices are low, farmers are abandoning farming for slums and cities, “all because of massive over-supply”(8);
- the industrial/commercial food production is responsible for most deforestation, most marine pollution, most coral reef destruction, much of greenhouse gas emission, most habitat loss, most of the degradation of streams and rivers; most food insecurity, most immigration, most water depletion, massive human health proclaims, etc. Planet earth is becoming literally un-inhabitable solely as

contd. >

result of the socio-economic and ecological consequences of industrial agriculture.

The implication of all this is that the chemical risks and the ecological devastation that accompany these technologies are totally unfounded and unnecessary! Pesticides and the agribusiness food crops like GMOs exist solely to extract profit from the food chain. They have no other purpose!

Above all, the domination of the industrial food system leads invariably to dependence, uniformity, poisoning and ecological degradation inequality, land grabbing, and, not so far off, to climate chaos(8). Wherever industrial agriculture is implemented it leaves landscapes progressively empty of life. Eventually, soil turns either into mud that washes into the rivers or into dust.

MYTH: Industrial/Commercial agriculture is the solution to hunger and starvation in India and the Global South

FACT: This is part of a mindset that views the solution in agri-business corporations. However, the balance sheet of this technical fix is better measured in the cradles of the so-called Green Revolution — Punjab and Haryana — where the cost of the land and water table, and dependent relationship on the financiers and agri corporations were never factored in. This model has since spelt rapid depletion of the natural capital for farming — soil, water and biodiversity.

In the long, food production based on this model has led farmers getting themselves into severe debt. They are all trapped in debt for buying costly chemicals and non-renewal seeds; sell the food they grow to pay back their debt. Many of these farmers being unable to repay these debts have ended up taking their lives. Besides, wherever chemical and commercial seeds have spread, farmers are in debt. They lose entitlement to their own produce and hence get trapped in poverty and hunger.

This treadmill of technologies affects consumers (food safety) and farmers (livelihood) security.

Consider the case of Bt cotton, the

only commercially approved GM crop in India. While the area under Bt cotton cultivation has risen considerably over the last decades, data analysis showed that productivity has not significantly risen, nor has pesticide use markedly decreased. In fact, cotton production has been on the decline since the last couple of years — a period when Bt cotton covered the majority of the cotton cultivated area in the country. Far from being a technological fix to rural poverty, Bt cotton has merely increased the distress of those dependent on farming, and acutely so in the semi-arid cotton belt. Costs have increased due to the appearance of new pests and others developing Bt resistance, higher water and fertilizer requirements, and no major benefit in the output. The main beneficiaries of this transfer to Bt Cotton are the seed MNCs like Monsanto which have profited through patents and royalty.

Attempts to flood agriculture with GM crops — around 71 at different stages of development in the pipeline — poses a serious threat to long-term food security. While such hasty techno-fixes to deal with the crisis in the farming community are afoot, malnutrition and genuine problems in the farming sector failed to be seriously addressed.

Farmers committing suicide are linked to the commercial pressures of the tech dependent agriculture, along with the control of mega corporations, the market and credit agencies. Increasing production is not the only solution to hunger and starvation in an inegalitarian society (8)

Victims of the "modern" Indian famine, induced by Winston Churchill, the Bengal Famine



List of famines in India (1765 – 1947)

Year	Name of famine (if any)	British Territory	Indian Kingdoms Princely States	Mortality
1769–70	Great Bengal famine	Bihar, Northern & Central Bengal	-	10 million (about 1/3rd of the then population of Bengal)
1783–84	Chalisa famine	-	Delhi, Western Oudh, Eastern Punjab region, Rajputana and Kashmir	11 million people may have died during the years 1782-84. Severe famine. Large areas were depopulated.
1791–92	<i>Dojibaro</i> famine or skull famine	Madras Presidency	Hyderabad, southern Maratha Country, Deccan, Gujarat and Marwar	11 million people may have died during the years 1788-94. One of the most severe famines known. People died in such numbers that they could not be cremated or buried
1837–38	Agra famine of 1837-38	Central doab and trans- <i>Jamuna</i> districts of North-Western provinces (later Agra province) including Delhi and Hissar	-	0.8 million or (800,000)
1860–61	Upper Doab famine of 1860-61	Upper Doab of Agra, Delhi and Hissar divisions of Punjab	Eastern Rajputana	2 million

1865-67	Orissa famine of 1866	Orissa (also 1867) and Bihar; Bellary and Ganjam districts of Madras	-	1 million (814,469 in Orissa, 135,676 in Bihar, and 10,898 in Ganjam)
1868-70	Rajputana famine of 1869	Ajmer, Western Agra, Eastern Punjab	Rajputana	1.5 million (mostly in the princely states of Rajputana)
1873-74	Bihar famine of 1873-74	Bihar	-	0.0 million An extensive relief effort was organized by the Bengal government. There were little to none significant mortalities during the famine
1876-78	Great famine of 1876-78 (also Southern India famine of 1876-78)	Madras and Bombay	Mysore and Hyderabad	5.5 million in British territory Mortality unknown for princely states. Total famine Mortality estimates vary from 6.1 to 10.3 mil.
1896-97	Indian famine of 1896-97	Madras, Bombay, Deccan, Bengal, United provinces, Central provinces	Northern and Eastern Rajputana parts of Central India and Hyderabad	5 million in British territory
1899-1900	Indian famine of 1899-1900	Bombay, Central Provinces, Berar, Ajmer	Hyderabad, Rajputana, Central India, Baroda, Kathiawar, Cutch	1 million in British territory Mortality unknown for princely states.
1943-44	Bengal famine of 1943	Bengal	-	1.5 million from starvation, 3.5 million deaths including epidemics

References:

1. Shatrugna, V. & Karpagam, S. Flawed Economics, The Hindu, December 12,2017
2. Himanshu. Hunger, Starvation and Aadhaar, Live Mint, October 23,2017
3. Parulkar, A. Starving in India: The Forgotten Problem, The Wall Street Journal, November 15,2017
4. Prasad, M. Starvation Deaths: Whose Fault is It Anyway?, Tehelka, #21, November 15,2017
5. Maitra, R. Genocide, the British...systematically starved to death over 60 millions of Eastern Indians! Serbian F.B. Reporter, July 1, 2015
6. Roy, A. & Saigal, N. The Politics of food for the Hungry, The Hindu, November 22,2017
7. Latham, J. How the Great Food War Will be Won, Independent Science News, January 12,2015
8. Mukerjee, M. The Imperial Roots of Hunger,Himal Southasian, June 16,2014

Next Issue:

The Aryan Invasion

Please feel free to reproduce material from this publication but with due credit to

Vikas Adhyayan Kendra.



Facts against Myths is a bi-monthly bulletin of factual information on a number of development myths and fallacies, etc, including information against alien development models, paradigms and false concepts on caste, creed and gender.

Produced and Published by:

Vikas Adhyayan Kendra, D-1 Shivdham, 62 Link Road, Malad (W), Mumbai 400 064, INDIA

Phone : +91 22 2882 2850 & 2889 8662 **Fax:** +91 22 2889 8941

Email : vak@bom3.vsnl.net.in

Website : www.vakindia.org

Printed by: Sudhir Joglekar for

Omega Publications, 2 & 3 Emerald Corner, Maratha Colony, Tilakwadi, Belgaum 590006

Cell : 09886203256