

Food, Hunger and Ethics

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Abstract

Management of hunger has to look into issues of availability, accessibility and adequacy. Posing it from an ethical perspective the paper argues out in favour of right to food. But, for this to happen, the state has to come up with an appropriate and effective bill on food and nutrition security, address the issue of inadequate provisioning of storage space by state agencies leading to rotting of foodgrains - a criminal waste when people are dying of hunger, and rely on a bottom-up approach involving the community that complements the top-down administrative structure to identify poor and reduce both exclusion and inclusion errors in targeting.

Keywords:

Bottom-up, cash transfers, exclusion and inclusion errors, foodgrains, Mahatma Gandhi, nutrition adequacy, poverty, Rawls, right to food, targeting, top-down, unique identification.

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Food, Hunger and Ethics¹

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1. Introduction

The question of hunger, more often than not, is not due to non-availability of food; it rather is a question of how to make the available food accessible to all (1). Again, provisioning of food for the hungry is not just to ensure that people eat. It also matters to look into issues of how much and what food people eat - an adequate, balanced and nutritious diet matters.

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Concerns with regard to the recent global food crisis brought into focus spiralling prices and some reduction in availability (2-3), but there also one cannot keep it independent from the concerns of accessibility and nutritional adequacy (4-5). Bringing together these divergent issues is a challenge for economic thinking, public policy and ethics.

It is in this context that the current write-up proposes to raise issues on food security of vulnerable sections of the population, crisis in Indian agriculture, inadequate storage and rotting of foodgrains procured by the public agencies, national food security bill, updating up of the poverty line for 2004-05 by the Planning Commission based on a new method, and some concomitant ethical issues. The latter will be an issue cutting across other themes, but which needs some independent discussion to motivate and we do that by posing the following question.

2. Who should get the fruit?

There were three children who want a fruit, say an apple, which as the old adage suggests, if consumed one per day will keep the doctor away. The first child, Kus, has a special liking for apple and gets immense satisfaction out of it and enjoys eating it the most (the other two children agree to this); the second child, Dhu, is the one who took efforts in nurturing and tending the plant of which this is the first fruit (the other two children do not deny this); and the third child, Rae, is undernourished and without access to enough food (the other two concede that they are well supplied with food). Now the question is: who should get the fruit? This question is similar to the one on flute indicated by Amartya Sen (6).

In different forums and discussions where this question has been raised by the current author, there is a convergence of opinion in favour of Rae, the malnourished child, getting the fruit. This position seems to be egalitarian, but the agreement could have different reasoning, some taking a philanthropic view of giving food to the needy and some others arguing from a rights perspective that each and every individual has a right to food. The latter differ from the former by stating that it is not a dole that is being given to the poor and needy out of sympathy. It is their right!

At times there are instances when one comes across an argument from the perspective of a libertarian that the person who put the effort should own the fruit, a property right, and should be compensated for this in some form. If the compensation has a public policy provisioning and the fruit is given to Rae, this does not question the right to food perspective.

There are utilitarian arguments in favour of Kus being given the apple who in turn gives some other food to Rae. This may not violate a right to food, but it could lead to Rae consuming some unhealthy food with adverse implications in bodily health. Thus, in a sense, it still violates Rae's right to food, albeit, with concerns on health and nutrition. Independent of the health implications, compensation with some other food means that Rae will have to make do with some second-best preference, a compromise.

The argument in favour of Rae's right to food can also be viewed from a Rawlsian difference principle, that is, it should have the greatest benefit to the least advantaged members of the society (7). This emanates from an original position when people are under a veil of ignorance and they do not know who they are. It is akin to the maxmin outcome, choosing the best possible outcome from the worst possible scenario, because people do not know who they are while deciding their strategies. However, the Rawlsian difference principle is much more than maxmin because it is based on mutuality and trust. More importantly, the difference principle is the concluding or second part of the second principle of Rawls' two principles of justice. It is preceded in priority by the first part of the second principle that refers to fair equal opportunities for all then to choose the most suitable person(s) to positions of power and authority. These are preceded by the first principle, which has an overarching priority and refers to equal liberties for all.

Something similar, but much more profound social thought echoes from Mahatma Gandhi's talisman - when in doubt, recall the face of the most vulnerable person and contemplate about the implication of your actions on that person and you will find your answers. This can be applied as a test for any intervention that one plans, public policy or otherwise. Its advantage over Rawls is in two aspects. First, one need not be under a veil to be in the

original position, one can be thyself. Second, one need not be under the realm of abstract thought, one can be grounded in practical reality. There will be no doubt on Rae's right to food.

3. Food security and vulnerability

India ranks 66 among 88 countries in the Global Hunger Index (GHI) of 2010 (8). GHI is a multidimensional measure using three equally weighted indicators, viz., proportion of undernourished population for 2004-06, proportion of underweight children below the age of five for 2003-08, and mortality rate of under-five children for 2008. With a GHI value of 23.7 the situation is considered alarming for India. What is more, a similar calculation for 17 major states indicates that the situation is serious in four, alarming in 12 and extremely alarming in one (9: 16). More and more individuals are like Rae. This indicates a greater relevance of right to food.

There are two points of concern in the calculation of undernourished population being based on 1800 kilocalorie as an adequate requirement. First, this seems to have emerged from the thinking that such people will receive state support under some social security arrangement, as in some Western societies, to meet their minimum food requirement and that they do not have to put in hard labour. But, this norm will be inadequate for those individuals whose occupation and other contingencies will require greater energy intake, as is often the case with the poor in many parts of the world.

Second, even when one agrees with the norm, a more appropriate term that it represents is the proportion of underfed population because besides deficiencies in energy, undernourishment also includes deficiencies in protein, vitamin and minerals among others (8: 9). Such an interpretation also fits with the final index being a measure of hunger, not undernourishment. Even for the poor, a first priority will be to meet some minimum energy requirement to avoid starvation. But, once this is met there are other priorities of life such as educational requirement of children or immediate health needs of some family members that could take precedence over food and nutritional adequacy. But, shortfalls in adequate food and nutrition will also have adverse long term implications on health that can also have

intergenerational impacts - poor health of mother being translated to a poor health in the child. Thus, not giving the fruit to Rae also takes us beyond the domain of right to food to issues of inequities in health and nutrition (10).

The total cereal consumption for all deciles, excluding that of the lowest decile, has declined from 1972-73 to 2004-05 (11: 43). A closer look reveals that the decline has largely been for nutri-cereals (like bajra and jowar among others) across all decile groups, which in some sense has been replaced by rice and wheat for the lower decile groups. What could give the impression of a changing consumption pattern over time is actually an outcome of the larger agricultural policy following the green revolution, with an excessive focus on rice and wheat, to the neglect of other crops. This has also coincided with the poverty norm being linked with a calorie requirement or energy consumption. Thus, Rae's right to food has to go beyond cereals and also include among other things, fruits.

Between 1972-73 and 2004-05, one also observes that energy consumption of the richest decile and the poorest decile is converging, but a substantial gap still remains with the energy consumption of the latter as a proportion of the former being 53 per cent in rural areas and 56 per cent in urban areas in 2004-05 (11: 44). While the positive relationship between energy intake and expenditure deciles is understandable from an income perspective, there is an ethical imperative because the energy requirement is likely to have an inverse relationship. Then again, the average food consumption misses out on capturing the uncertainty that the poor face in terms of access to food and that could mean some days of starvation. Such a struggle for food on a daily basis is likely to exclude other things essential for the development of a healthy body and mind.

The study further shows that the growth of per capita expenditure for the bottom five decile groups compared to the all India average is higher when 2004-05 is compared with 1972-73, but lower when it is compared with 1993-94 (11: 42). This means that the poorer groups had relatively lower increments in recent years, which is also identified as a post-reforms period where the economy has witnessed a higher growth path. Some of the other vulnerable populations (or those identified with Rae) are lactating and pregnant mothers,

children – particularly the girl child and school dropouts, the elderly, single and destitute women, those with ailments and physical disabilities, dalits and tribals, and the unemployed among others. Similarly, some sectors have not benefitted as much as others have. One such sector is agriculture.

4. Crisis in Indian Agriculture

Indian agriculture is under a crisis that manifests in twin dimensions – agricultural and agrarian (12-13). The former is indicative of developmental failure on account of poor public provisioning to the agricultural sector. This resulted in a deceleration in production and productivity of almost all crops in the 1990s (triennium ending (TE) 1994-95 to TE 2007-08) when compared to the 1980s (TE 1981-82 to TE 1993-94); the per annum growth rates in production during 1990s for foodgrains, oilseeds and sugarcane at 1.1 per cent, 1.2 per cent and 1.4 per cent respectively is lower than the per annum population growth rate of 1.9 per cent for 1991-2001 (12: 49-50) or 1.6 per cent for 2001-11, as per the latest census.

The latter points out the threat to the livelihood base of the mass of small and marginal farmers and agricultural labourers. The annual per capita per availability of foodgrains has come down from 177 kilograms in TE 1992 to 159 kilograms in TE 2007. Using the norm of 2400 kilocalories per consumer unit (this is a lower than per capita, as it adjusts for age and sex composition), the incidences of calorie poor in rural India is 43 per cent; it is even higher for the occupational group of agricultural labourers at 58 per cent and the land size group of marginal holding (0-1 hectare) households at 47 per cent (12: 54). A cruel irony is that the hands that grow food do not have enough to eat.

Further, the nemesis of the Indian farmer has been poor returns to cultivation, which based on a nation-wide survey conducted during 2003, is less than eight rupees per person per day (14). To contextualize with our fruit predicament, this reflects the sorry state of affairs for Dhu. What is more, Dhu's situation is like Rae falling short of the adequate food and nutrition requirement. The farmers have been having some relief with recent increases in minimum support prices for foodgrains. This, however, has brought into limelight the need for proper storage and distribution of foodgrains.

5. The rotting foodgrains

In recent times, the rotting of foodgrains in storage facilities of the Food Corporation of India (FCI) and other public agencies such as the Central and State Warehousing Corporations (C&SWCs) has received much attention. “Between 1997 and 2007, 1.83 lakh tonnes of wheat, 6.33 lakh tonnes of rice, 2.20 lakh tonnes of paddy and 111 lakh tonnes of maize were damaged in different FCI godowns,” revealed a right to information petition (15). The Supreme Court of India in an order also pointed out that: “...In a country where admittedly people are starving, it is crime to waste even a single grain” (16). It further suggested the Government to take different steps including among others, distributing the food to those who deserve it. This in a sense also reflects Rae's right to food, but more importantly, it also points out the states duties to make that right feasible.

The Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food & Public Distribution in a recent press release indicates that as of 1 June 2011 the capacity with FCI and other public agencies to store grains is 623.65 lakh tonnes of which 28.5 per cent (or 177.69 lakh tonnes) is under cover and plinth in the open. What is worrying is that this combined capacity is only 95.3 per cent of the stocks at 654.73 lakh tonnes (17). A letter to the Supreme Court of India further highlights poor foodgrains management on two additional aspects (18). First, there are instances of storage of foodgrains under cover and plinth in the open for more than a year exposing them to two or three monsoons and thereby rendering a substantial amount of it unfit for consumption. Second, the FCI let go of hired space because of adverse remarks from the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) and then could not hire back the same when the situation warranted.

A parliamentary committee report on similar concerns begins by invoking the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights while reiterating the State's obligation “to ensure for everyone under its jurisdiction access to the minimum essential food which is sufficient, nutritionally adequate and safe to ensure their freedom from hunger” (19: paragraph 1.1). The report goes on to suggest the need to construct additional storage spaces in a decentralized and time bound

manner without compromising on modern scientific technology, have more frequent physical verification of the stored foodgrains stocks, introduce the national food security bill (NFSB) at an early date, and finalize the poverty estimates so as to help reduce exclusion and inclusion error among others (19). The NFSB is likely to be introduced in the monsoon session of the parliament in 2011 and the Planning Commission has now accepted the new poverty estimates for 2004-05 suggested by an expert group that it had constituted. Both these issues need some further discussion.

6. National food security bill

A debate on the proposed NFSB has already been initiated in the press and other forums because of two versions - one that the National Advisory Council (NAC) has suggested (20), and another one that the Empowered Group of Ministers (EGOM) seek to introduce (21). Both the versions have official sanction, and hence, it is good to see a discussion within the government itself. However, note that the NAC version also has the involvement of civil society, particularly a network of individuals and association under the aegis of right to food. Some remarks are in order.

The NAC version begins with a preamble, which ends indicating that "... a set of core entitlements within the universal right to food and nutrition are provided to be enjoyed and progressively expanded until universal access to adequate nutrition is achieved" (20: 2). The EGOM does not have a preamble invoking the constitution and international covenants, but begins by stating that the bill will "... provide for food and nutritional security, in human life cycle approach, by ensuring access to adequate quantity of quality food at affordable prices" (21). Thus, in a sense both agree to the relevance of nutrition in this exercise and one feels that this primacy should be explicitly mentioned in the title, which should read as the National Food and Nutrition Security Bill, 2011.

At some point the EGOM version refers to cash transfers in lieu of entitlement and leveraging it with unique identification. Both these points have been in discussion in policy circles for quite some time and have a common origin. They are likely to do away with

leakages and bring about effective targeting. The intentions are to address Rae's right to food. But, they suffer from a common problem - they miss the real issue.

Cash transfer is a money-centric approach that ignores the need to make food available where people need it. If food is made available and there exists an effective foodgrains distribution mechanism then cash transfers (perhaps one that is pegged to the real amount of food, note that this is different from being conditional to food purchases only) could make it accessible. Unique identification is a techno-centric approach to a real world problem of identifying individuals with food and nutrition insecurity. Independent of the issue of privacy under unique identification, which is equally important in a democratic polity, any technology for identifying people should be leveraged only after it is in place. This is not to belittle either the relevance of money or technology. They are very important, but as means and not as ends. One has to be cautious in the approach, otherwise exclusion and inclusion errors can take different forms and dimensions (22).

7. Counting the poor

Exclusion error is considered more serious than inclusion error. This is particularly so in a welfare state and that too when the excluded person would be much below the poverty line whereas the included person is just a wee-bit above that line. Then again, the norm used as a poverty line could refer to one aspect of vulnerability whereas the intervention measure through public policy could be intended for something else.

In India, food and nutrition interventions have different forms. Some of these are the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) through Anganwadi for children below six years and pregnant and lactating mothers, the Mid-day Meal (MDM) scheme for children going to government and government-assisted primary schools, and the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS) under which below poverty line households receive food ration at a subsidised price through the fair price shops.

Under TPDS it is essential to know the list of people below the poverty line. The Planning Commission has now accepted the recommendation of the expert group where incidence of

poverty is 41.8 per cent for rural areas and 25.7 per cent for urban areas in 2004-05 (23). While calculating this, the expert group did away with benchmarking the incidence of poverty with a calorie norm. The report of the expert group does mention that around the poverty line, people in urban India can afford the existing norm. But, their observed intake of 1776 kilocalories is closer to a norm of 1770 kilocalories indicated by Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). If the latter is being used as a justification in support of the observed intake then it misses the point that once basic hunger is satisfied then people will have other priorities that could compromise with food and nutrition security. It could be education of children, health care needs of family member, and social functions (marriage, birth and death) among others. Or, as in Adam Smith's England, to buy a pair of leather shoes so as to avoid going out without shame (24: V.2.148). It is another matter that the FAO norm is for light and sedentary activities and not for medium to heavy activities that the poor may be associated with, in the Indian context. Thus, the claim that the new poverty line goes beyond calorie needs and incorporates the health care and education requirement is invalid (25-27).

There are a few other concerns with this new estimate. It uses median expenditure of health and education as a norm, which could be an underestimate because expenditure distribution is positively skewed (25, 28). It is not easy to replicate or to come up with comparable poverty lines for earlier years (29). Thus, time series analysis, beyond what is given in the report, is difficult. And, the acceptance of the poverty ratio for urban India from the old method as a starting point and then using it to compute a poverty line basket, has no other basis other than a pragmatic consideration of starting from somewhere (30-31). More importantly, it changes the share of poor across states, and if the absolute numbers are not taken into consideration for increasing the budget, then poorer states will get lower amounts under some centrally sponsored poverty reduction schemes (32).

As the estimates of the expert group are based on a sample survey of consumption expenditure from households, it cannot be used to identify poor households in the population. Before providing food or fruit, Rae needs to be identified. It is for this that an independent census of below poverty line households in rural areas is underway in 2011.

This should be an independent exercise. The incidence calculated using the national sample survey data cannot be imposed on the census data to limit the number of households who are poor even if one allows a margin to address for some exigencies (33). This top-down approach may reduce the inclusion error, but is likely to increase the exclusion error.

What is required is a bottom-up approach grounded in reality to complement the top-down administrative structure and implementing mechanism. There is a strong case to involve the community at various levels, strengthen transparency to evaluate processes at each and every stage after policy formulation till achievement of the policy objectives, and improve accountability (34-35).

8. Concluding remarks

Any analysis of hunger has to take into consideration availability, accessibility and adequacy of food among others. In our fruit predicament, a win-win situation is in compensating Dhu and providing for Rae, and Kus also ends up with positive externalities when both Dhu and Rae become better off. It satisfies Mahatma Gandhiji's talisman and Rawlsian fairness. The state should come up with an appropriate and effective bill on food and nutrition security, address the issue of rotting foodgrains - a criminal waste when people still die of starvation, and rely on bottom-up methods that complements the top-down administrative structure to identify poor and reduce both exclusion and inclusion errors in targeting.

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