

Print Close Window

Band-aid for cancer

Jayaprakash Narayan Posted online: Sunday, Feb 24, 2013 at 0000 hrs

Ash in the Belly: India's Unfinished Battle Against Hunger

Harsh Mander

Penguin, Rs 350, Pp 368

Gruelling, abject poverty and consequent starvation are the great, but avoidable tragedies of the 21st century. Grinding poverty and starvation are wholly avoidable because we produce enough to feed all people. We may not agree on the existence of God, but every sensitive human being would readily agree that avoidable suffering is the greatest sin.

Harsh Mander is a compassionate, sensitive soul, and his book, *Ash in the Belly*, is full of graphic, harrowing tales of degrading, dehumanising poverty and starvation. That such a situation prevails today is an indictment of our society and state. Despite decades of planning, *garibi hatao* policies and welfare state, poverty and starvation persist. Harsh Mander, having described the horror of starvation in countless narrations, offers us a prescription—a law guaranteeing food security to all! That there is a huge problem, and we need to do something quickly is self evident. As individuals, we often resort to personal acts of charity. This piety expiates us of the guilt, and has the added advantage in our tradition; it is the route to salvation. But when the state acts, it cannot merely do 'something'; it has to adopt the best method to alleviate poverty and end suffering. The policy maker has a duty to review past policies and outcomes, draw lessons from experience, examine the successful best practices, prioritise various needs, adopt policies best suited to achieve desired results, allocate resources and, if needed, make laws. But for Harsh Mander, all this is tedious nuisance. There is starvation; the poor should be fed; the state should provide food; because the state cannot be trusted, there should be a law to enforce food security; and because food security for 150 million people (average of the extreme numbers given in the book) will not be well implemented, the state should cover 78% of the population—or 850 million people. That is the gist of the argument.

Even for a compassionate, partisan advocate, this argument is very thin, and reduces the book to a pamphlet. First, a law is often a substitute for resolute action and does not guarantee outcomes. But it has the merit of pretending to have done something! Take the Right to Education Act. Long ago, Myron Weiner, in an evocative and scholarly book, *The Child and State in India*, demonstrated conclusively the 'psychology of caste', and the failure of the Indian state and elites to focus on education. This failure to educate and empower the children of the poor guaranteed perpetuation of poverty and caste-based inequity. The world over, it has been well-recognised that education, skills, jobs and incomes are the only effective and enduring means of combating poverty and ensuring social mobility. Once education is denied to the bulk of the people, the accident of birth will continue to determine the fate of millions of children, and the poor will forever remain poor. Every sensible modern society recognised this, and made education the centrepiece of their strategy to combat poverty and inequality. Indian obsession with handouts to the poor, instead of empowering them, ensured that education was always low on priority. And when global pressure (millennium development goals) and unfavourable comparisons with other countries finally forced the state to act, all that happened was a constitutional amendment (how the absence of a constitutional guarantee was an impediment to educating children is a mystery never resolved!), a law, and a programme to ensure the enrollment of children. The net result is near-universal enrollment, but the

outcomes are appalling. The ASER surveys pioneered by Pratham (an educational NGO) reveal that 25% of children in seventh grade cannot even read a second grade-level passage; 40% cannot subtract, and 70% cannot do a division! In the PISA (Programme for International Students' Assessment) survey covering 74 countries to measure educational outcomes of 15 year-olds, India is ranked 73rd, just one place above the bottom-ranked Kyrgyzstan republic!

It is not a question of money alone. In a survey including all the rich countries like the US, Japan, Germany, France, Italy, Canada, Australia, etc, the nation ranked first is China! All our talk of right to education has not achieved much because laws have become a substitute for resolute, purposive, sensible, sustained action.

Second, India has had decades of experience with the public distribution system. Nearly R80,000 crore is spent annually on the so-called food subsidy. And yet, time and again surveys reveal that about 40% of foodgrains are 'recycled'—sold by recipients for a higher price, and find their way back to FCI in the form of procurement! A district civil supplies official's posting has a high market value—ranging from R10 lakh to R1 crore! A fair price shop dealer's appointment in many cities costs R3 lakh! As much as 50% of kerosene goes back to adulteration mafias, and is mixed with diesel—adding to the subsidy burden and pollution. At every level of foodgrain procurement and distribution, there is a well-established chain of corruption. And yet, the author's solution is, if something has failed, do more of it in the same way, and throw more public money at the problem! Third, how did hunger affecting 80-230 million lead to the author's (and NAC's) prescription of a food security law to guarantee near-free food through PDS to 850 million people? Enlarge the definition of starvation and accept some benchmarks uncritically, and on this foundation of sand, build castles! A body mass index (BMI) of 18.5 is taken as a criterion to determine starvation. Such a crude measure disregarding our conditions has unintended consequences. When I joined the National Academy in Mussoorie as a young IAS recruit in 1980 (along with Harsh Mander and 123 others), my weight was 53 kg. With a height of 174 cm, my BMI was just over 17, and I was over 3 kg underweight. By the BMI yardstick, I was starving, I would be entitled to free or highly subsidised food at R2 or R3 per kg! And yet, I was healthy, physically active, and by all accounts, perfectly capable of discharging duties as a civil servant. From extending the concern from hunger and starvation to benchmarking based on BMI, and then extending the 'food security' to 90% of rural population and 50% urban dwellers on the ground that targeting PDS will undermine access is but a simple and neat trick.

Then there is the question of what is the best way of helping people stave off hunger and starvation. Is it necessary to expand the failed, corrupt, ineffective PDS, or should we think of ways to enhance the purchasing power and access to food? Economic logic tells us that when there are no shortages, and the market is working reasonably well in ensuring that consumers get what they want, and farmers are able to sell their produce, the best way of helping the poor is to give them the means to purchase the food they need. But for advocates of food security, starving people cannot be trusted to buy food; they must be fed by a patronising, all-pervasive government bureaucracy—no matter how inefficient and corrupt PDS is. Past experience and evidence are mere distractions for the compassionate, committed activists! Sadly, evidence does not support their enthusiasm. Andhra Pradesh has seen the first R2 per kg rice in 1983, with the rise of NTR to power. YSR and now the present Congress government expanded coverage and reduced the price to R1 per kg. For a population of 8.4 crore (2011 Census), over 2.3 crore households are given ration cards. As much as 42 lakh tonnes of rice is distributed in AP, the highest in any state. Assuming four members per household, the recipients of foodgrains exceed the population. And yet, Harsh Mander's book is full of grim tales of hunger and starvation deaths in AP!

The best way of government intervention is not necessary PDS in a decrepit, corruption-ridden, wasteful system. The Employment Guarantee Act did more to enhance food security than PDS,

because money is directly put in the pockets of the poor. It would be far more effective if food subsidy is passed on to the poor households directly as cash. There are legitimate concerns about liquor consumption among the rural poor. The answer lies in stricter regulation, minimising access to liquor to the poor, and transfer of money to the women in the family—not a more massive PDS. Harsh Mander does not even countenance sensible targeting of government subsidies, and creating incentives to promote health checkups, vaccination, institutional delivery and family planning. The arguments are bizarre. It is almost as if we need poverty and hunger to continue, for the personal salvation and expression of piety of the benefactors! With friends like that, do the poor need enemies?

Amartya Sen recently summed up succinctly this strange mindset of otherwise decent, humane people. As Sen argued, the do-gooders failed to focus on causes of poverty, and never addressed education, sanitation, healthcare, skills, jobs and incomes! The result is band-aids for cancer! For every problem, yet another massive expenditure, and yet another vast bureaucracy, and yet another set of centralised, high-powered bodies are seen as the solution. For food security, we have the usual prescriptions—the high-powered national and state committees, DGROs appointed for a tenure by the UPSC (no less!) and a national appointments committee! If it is not so bizarre and byzantine, this effort to create a leviathan is tragic-comic. That this is now the mainstream thinking in exalted policy circles is an indication of how far our governments and political parties are divorced from common sense and genuine, long-term public good. Human dignity, empowerment, jobs and incomes—all these are rendered irrelevant. Our activists are fond of misquoting Gandhiji's talisman. They conveniently ignore the Mahatma's admonition of control over destiny!

“If the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him? Will he gain anything by it? Will it restore him to a control over his own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to swaraj for the hungry and spiritually starving millions?”

The Chinese proverb, “Don't merely give the hungry man a fish meal; teach him how to fish and give him a fishing rod”, clearly falls on deaf ears in this climate.

In a book of over 300 pages on poverty and hunger, paucity of resources, fiscal crisis, competing priorities for resource allocation, the plight of farmers and rural economy, and the extreme inefficiency and subjugation resulting from an over-centralised government without empowering people—all these are predictably ignored. On occasion there is a passing mention of some of these issues, with neither analysis nor a sense of direction or solution.

Finally, there is complete neglect of the legitimate and effective role of the state in a modern society. It is almost as if 5,000 years of human history, and over two centuries of modern statecraft have no lessons to offer. There seems to be no realisation that the Indian state has largely failed in its basic functions—public order, justice and rule of law which would give dignity and protection to the poor, infrastructure and basic amenities which would help the poor enjoy public goods on a par with the rich; and education, healthcare and skill promotion which would enable the poor to move up the ladder and give them a chance to earn enough to take care of themselves, and to compete with the children of the high and mighty. And yet, this inefficient, weak state is sought to be burdened with yet another massive programme at the cost of its primary functions, in the hope that hungry bellies will get some more food.

If this book and writings of a similar kind at least stimulate meaningful, intelligent debate on the best ways to address the real challenges of poverty, that would be a productive, but unintended consequence of the publication. Let us hope for the best.

Jayaprakash Narayan is the founder and president of Lok Satta Party