

The Curse of Hunger and Malnutrition
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Though more than half a century has passed since India got independence the starvation deaths and wide-spread malnutrition are sad realities even today! Recently daily newspapers and the audio-visual media have highlighted the death of 11 children due to malnutrition and hunger in the Dongriguda area of Norangpur District in Orissa. The fortnightly magazine "Frontline" dated August 27, 2004 has published an article on the sad situation of deaths due to hunger and malnutrition in Orissa.

Every year the newspapers and other mass media organizations inform us that poor people are dying of hunger and malnutrition in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, etc. It is a pity that our politicians as well as the executive and the administrative 'babus' fail to face the problems squarely and find a permanent solution.

Some years ago when there was widespread draught in 14 states in India, the Director of Action Aid India, Mr Harsh Mandar brought to light that 60 million tonnes of grain were getting rotten in government go-downs and open storage grounds!

In the World Social Forum which met at Mumbai from 16 to 21, January 2004 a Mr Hari of the "Musahar" caste of Bihar said that the first thing they teach their children was the important lesson to live with hunger. "When the child is small it cries with hunger. If the child does not keep quiet we will give him a little opium which will make him sleep. When the child grows a little older, we will make him understand that there is no escape from living with hunger" said Hari.

Lakhs and even crores of people have to face hunger and live with it, even today in the continents of Asia, Africa and Latin America. Many times it is not the lack of grain and other eatable things which cause death by hunger and malnutrition; but it is the corruption and the callous attitude of the administrative and executive officials and the negligence or incompetence of our power-hungry politicians.

According to the Food and Agricultural Organizations of the United Nations Organization (UNO) there are 8420 lakh people who experience in-security in food in the world. And 25 percent of the people without food security live in India! Though India has only 17% of the world population, the 25% of the world population suffering from malnutrition and hunger are in India today!

Taking this situation of malnutrition and hunger in the world the UNO has declared 2004 as the International Year of RICE. And the motto of the International Year of Rice is "Rice means Life". Rice is the staple food for half the world population. Rice is not only food for crores of people, but rice is also the life-sustaining means of labour and business. As the population increases in many countries, so also the demand for rice increases. So the motto of the International Year of Rice is very appropriate : "Rice means Life".

By observing the International Year of Rice, the UNO hopes to increase the world production of rice and create food security for crores of people. In this way the UNO plans to completely stop deaths due to hunger and malnutrition.

People engaged in agriculture need equipment and other means of production so that they can produce more and attain food security. They also need the freedom and the facilities to do business with rice and related products.

Also, the rights of farmers over their products and over the local markets need to be acknowledged and respected. We need to see that the agricultural products of the means of livelihood of farmers are not affected by importing cheap agricultural goods which are produced with government subsidy in foreign countries.

The basic human right for food is acknowledged today all over the world. The right for food was included in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the UNO in 1948. In the same way the Universal Declaration of 1974 against death by malnutrition and hunger has acknowledged the freedom of every individual from malnutrition and hunger and also the right of everyone to develop one's mental and bodily powers with proper nourishment.

I believe that everybody has the right for nutritious food and freedom from hunger and malnutrition. This can be seen in the fact that the government budgets usually allot crores of rupees to help the poor. According to the INDIAN CURRENTS issue of August 15, 2004, the subsidy for food in the 2003-04 budget is a staggering amount of Rs.27,800 crores.

The article in the INDIAN CURRENTS commenting on the 2003-04 budget says: "All pro-poor subsidies come to a total of Rs.2,74,352 crore. If the same amount is directly transferred to 30 crore BPL (below poverty level) people, each individual will get Rs.9,145 a year, amounting to nearly Rs.46,000/- per household. If this transfer had actually occurred, there would not have been any destitution in India". But this does not happen.

From this ideal thinking let us come to the world of reality. What can you and I do to make our contribution so that all men and women within our reach get the food which is their basic right?

First, let us be aware of the social evils which keep the poor away from getting their basic right for nutritious food. In the present social order if the daily wage earners and the workers in the unorganized sector do not find jobs and get minimum wages, then they have no other way than suffer hunger and malnutrition. We all need to be sensitive to this problem and concerned people need to be informed of this plight of the poor.

Second, let us make sure that we give just wages to the poor people who work for us. The poor are helpless and work for whatever remuneration offered. Let us not exploit this helpless situation of the poor people.

Third, let us support the government and non-government organizations which work for the removal of death by hunger and malnutrition. Poverty is a social and moral evil with many manifestations. They need to be confronted squarely.

And finally, let us be convinced of one thing that the death caused by hunger and malnutrition in India is a blot on every citizen of this country. India can remove this blot with political will and concerted efforts of all concerned people.

I hope that the Mr Manmohan Singh government will give priority to stop the recurring deaths due to hunger and malnutrition in different parts of India. The government needs to fight against all man-made and natural forces which cause hunger and malnutrition. In this way, let us hope that during the next five years hunger and malnutrition are totally done away with from India. This is possible through

every citizen becoming aware of the problems and taking appropriate steps within his/her reach and power.