



Hunger-free India

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Mahatma Gandhi accorded the highest priority for freedom from hunger. He pointed out that 'God is bread' to those who are hungry. We are witnessing a sad situation in our country where the annual economic growth rate of 7-8% is a matter for joy and the widespread occurrence of poverty is a matter of shame. We have witnessed in recent years the coexistence of grain mountains and hungry millions. Fortunately

three years ago Parliament approved a Food Security Act which provides the minimum essential food for those needing social protection against hunger.

We are now entering an era of *anthropocene* where human beings determine the shape of things to come like climate change and rising sea levels. The emergence of anthropocene calls for a holistic approach to a whole range of issues.

How can we develop policies and strategies which can help to achieve harmony between human beings and nature and also among human beings? We have to start with our human resource to provide a roadmap for sustainable development.

Nurturing our Human Heritage

The most important resource of a country is its human wealth. It is, therefore, a matter of regret that the latest UNDP human development report 2015



ranks our country at the position of 130 among 188 countries. The criteria used by UNDP include years of schooling and life expectancy at birth. We need to pay greater attention to the quality of education. Numerous universities are coming up mostly in the private sector which place greater emphasis on bricks than on brains.

For brain development, early

childhood nutrition is important. Hence, there is a growing emphasis on special attention to the nutrition of the child during its first 1,000 days. In order to help in achieving the zero hunger challenge of the UN and also the objectives of Goal 2 of Sustainable Development Goal (End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture).

Zero Hunger India

Dr. Jose Graziano Da Silva, Director General of FAO, has recently warned that achieving the zero hunger target is a challenging task and that the battle for eliminating hunger is far from over. This is a timely warning since there is complacency in the food production and consumption areas. FAO estimates that

490 million people across Asia and the Pacific are suffering from undernutrition.

This is why I wish to reiterate the three-point strategy I have been advocating.

First, we should implement effectively the provisions of the National Food Security Act in order to overcome undernutrition.

Second, we should eliminate protein hunger through the greater production and consumption of pulses starting from 2016 which is the International Year of Pulses.

Third, we should eradicate hidden hunger caused by micronutrient deficiencies in the diet through leveraging agriculture for nutrition.

This will involve the cultivation and consumption of biofortified crops which provide agricultural/ horticultural remedies to the nutritional maladies prevailing in an area. Mainstreaming of nutritional consideration in the design of farming systems will help to achieve the goal of freedom from malnutrition speedily and economically. Nutrition literacy can be spread through Community Hunger Fighters.

Agricultural pathway of overcoming malnutrition

A recent article in *Down to Earth* (1-15 March 2016) describes the serious malnutrition prevailing in several parts of Maharashtra, particularly in the Amaravati district. The author Shri Jitendra has quoted the work of Satav, who said, "Our study shows a tribal family consumes less than 50g of vegetables per



day, when an individual needs around 200 g of vegetables.” This emphasises the urgency of mainstreaming nutrition in farming systems by a procedure which I have termed *Farming System for Nutrition* (FSN).

What is now needed is the introduction of FSN approach wherever the malnutrition problem can be solved through locally grown biofortified plants. FSN has three components; first, introduce crops which can address the malnutrition problem prevailing in an area. Second, establish a Genetic Garden of Biofortified Plants which will introduce the local community



to agricultural remedies for the nutritional maladies of the area. Finally, train at least one woman and one male member of each Panchayat as Community Hunger Fighters who are knowledgeable of the malnutrition problem and of local farm level solutions. This will be the most economical and speedy method of achieving a malnutrition free Amaravati as well as other districts with a high malnutrition burden.

2016 is the ‘International Year of Pulses’, but unfortunately the gap between demand and supply is growing and prices are rising. **According to the latest report, the prices of pulses surged by about 34% since March 2016.** Although government announces a reasonable minimum support price, there is no mechanism to implement it at the field level. Hence, both consumers and farmers suffer. Pulses are particularly

grown in dry farming areas with minimum irrigation. They enrich soil fertility through biological nitrogen fixation. The National Pulses Mission for which funds have been provided in the 2016-17 budget should pay concurrent attention to the conservation of genetic resources, cultivation using organic farming

methods, consumption and commerce.

To promote group endeavour in water harvesting and pest management, Pulses Panchayats should be promoted. If such steps are not taken the ruling high prices will neither help alleviate protein hunger nor benefit the small farmers who toil in sun and rain cultivating these protein rich crops. Let the 'International Pulses Year' be a turning point in the history of pulses production and consumption in our country.

Implementing the Food Security Act

I am happy that the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) of Parliament has

decided to prepare a report on the implementation of the Food Security Act. The National Food Security Act is a unique legislation that should make our farmers proud since they are mainly responsible for taking our country from the days of the Bengal Famine to the time we can confer the legal right to food with home grown food. This transition is probably unique in the world history. I would suggest that the following unique features of the Bill should be examined in the context of implementation:

- The Bill provides for a whole life cycle approach in terms


of food security. This will require particular attention to the first 1,000 days of a child's life which are critical for brain development and later cognitive abilities

- **The seniormost woman** in the household will be designated the Head of the Household from the point of view of food entitlements

- **Enlargement of the Food Basket** by including nutri-millets and other neglected crops in the Public Distribution System (PDS)

- The pricing, procurement and PDS should involve millets, including *jowar*, *bajra* and *ragi*. It will also be appropriate to redesignate the so-called coarse grains as nutri-rich climate smart cereals.

I hope PAC will also take into consideration the good features enshrined in the Chhattisgarh Act such as provision of pulses, and biofortified salt, so that protein hunger and micronutrient malnutrition can also be addressed simultaneously. The review by PAC provides a unique opportunity for strengthening the Bill and improving its administration and delivery systems, so that we can achieve the Zero Hunger Target soon.



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The aim of having an Indian single Market is to control food inflation and price volatility. GST will facilitate the implementation of the proposal for promoting an Indian Single Market. An Indian Single Market has other advantages like allowing free movement of food material without restrictions on the state borders. With due safeguards as already proposed during the debate in Rajya Sabha, we can witness a new beginning in agricultural progress and food security.

Launching a farmer's movement to overcome malnutrition

The occurrence of widespread malnutrition, particularly amongst women and children, is a cause for concern. IFPRI's Global Nutrition Report 2016, confirms that in the case of under-5 stunting and wasting, India's position is 114 and 120 respectively amongst 129 countries. Although we have many

schemes, there appear to be few targets and little synergy amongst them. The time has come, therefore, to review our strategy for achieving a malnutrition-free India. The major change in my view is to make farm families the leaders of the anti-malnutrition movement.

Farmers are the largest producers and consumers of food and by enabling them to adopt the following five-point strategy we can achieve our goals faster.

First, the eldest woman in the household, holding the food entitlements under the National Food Security Act, 2013, should be encouraged to demand nutri-millets and other grains, which have been included in the food basket along with rice and wheat.

Second, the production and consumption of pulses and other protein foods should be promoted through crop-crop and crop-livestock farming systems.

Third, we must promote knowledge of biofortified plants like *moringa*, sweet potato, *amla*, etc. which can help to overcome hidden hunger caused by micronutrient malnutrition.

Fourth, the non-food factors of nutrition security like clean drinking water, environmental hygiene and

sanitation should get concurrent attention.

Finally, there has to be understanding of the need to mainstream nutrition in major farming systems through both public policy support and monitoring progress.

Ensuring price stability and food safety

There is now widespread concern on the prevailing high rate of food inflation. Inflation in vegetable prices is particularly high, rising to 12.9% in May from 2.2% in April. Obviously this will further aggravate the problem of malnutrition, highlighted recently by the Global Nutrition Report. This year's price rise is not new, such a situation occurs now and then.



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Therefore, a permanent solution to food inflation should be found.

Urbanisation in India is growing and the problem of food inflation largely rises from the demand-supply gaps in urban areas. One way of stabilising the prices of vegetables and fruits in urban areas is to promote peri-urban horticulture by

providing the necessary technical and marketing support. Decentralised production, as for example in Israel, could be supported by cooperative marketing. Urban and peri-urban 'horticulture revolution' could pave the way for more stable prices to the consumer. At the same time, we should ensure that the quality of the food remains high and free of pesticide residues and other unsafe chemicals. Thus we can ensure stability of supply coupled with high quality and safe food, while contributing to price stability.

Indian Single Market

The passing of the GST Bill by Parliament is an important landmark in the

economic management of our country. The National Commission on Farmers had recommended steps which can lead to an Indian Single Market. The aim of having an Indian Single Market is to control food inflation and price volatility. GST will facilitate the implementation of the proposal for promoting an Indian Single Market. An Indian Single Market will have other advantages like allowing free movement of food material without restrictions on the state borders. With due safeguards as already proposed during the debate in Rajya Sabha, we can witness a new beginning in agricultural progress and food security.

Media reports predict a 6% agricultural growth

because of good monsoon. It is, therefore, time to formulate and implement a good weather code which can help us to maximise the benefits of a good monsoon. An important component of the Code is greater attention to safe storage, processing, value addition and remunerative marketing. It is important that every farm has a safe storage facility like a moisture proof bin and every ecosystem a silo. There is also need for a national grid of modern storage structures which can each store about a million tonnes of grains. Such a decentralised network of grain banks will help us to both minimise transport cost and implement the provisions of the national food security act in an effective manner. This will be the pathway for a hunger-free India.

Diwali or the festival of lights is an occasion for joy and happiness. The joy of Diwali should be experienced not only by those who are well-to-do but also by all children, women and men. Over 60 years ago, Rajaji had pointed out in his articles characterised by wisdom and wit that the poor children are left behind in the enjoyment of Diwali. When are we going to achieve happiness for all in the anthropocene era? Freedom from hunger and poverty should be our first priority since this era implies that human beings can shape the future. The challenge and response are both in our hands.



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