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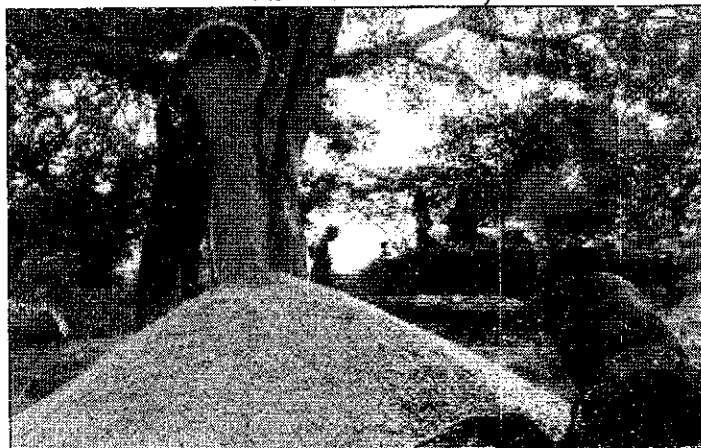
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Food security for thought

The goal of 'food for all' is proving more elusive than ever in the face of rising prices and falling production.

— Ashoke Chakrabarty



In terms of per capita availability, India has only 176.3 kg of foodgrains a year against the world average of 358.4 kg a year.

Devendra Mishra
Subhash Sharma

Way back in 1946 at Noakhali, Mahatma Gandhi had perceptively remarked: "To the hungry, God is bread." Right to food is a basic birthright for all and is an integral part of the right to life enshrined in Article 21 of the Indian Constitution as well as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). However, in the last 10 years, the goal of 'food for all' seems farther away than ever for the developing world, including India.

In the last three years, food prices worldwide have risen 83 per cent, raising fears of increased malnutrition, hunger and political instability. In much of the developing world, where 60-80 per cent of a family's income is spent on food, every 20 per cent increase in food prices pushes 100 million more people into the ranks of the poorest of the poor — those who live on less than \$1 a day.

According to Prof M. S. Swaminathan (2008), "Sustainable food security involves physical, economic and social access to a balanced diet and clean drinking water for every child, woman and man in the country."

Farmers in need

In India, a small/marginal farmer is forced to sell a part of his food production, even when it is insufficient to meet his family's yearly needs, to be able to pay for necessities such as utensils, clothes, health, education and so on. Thus, there exists a 'compulsive involvement', to use Krishna Bharadwaj's terms (1974), in the market.

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Second, the farmer also grows cash crops, which are more remunerative than food-grains. Third, during sowing they have to pay the labourers wages in cash. Fourth, most farmers also have to meet expenses for social obligations such as festivals, debt payment, and so on.

To encourage farmers to produce more the Government provides subsidies on fertilisers and irrigation (electricity charges), crop loans, and so on. In addition, it fixes the minimum support price (MSP) for various foodgrains, pulses, oilseeds and cash crops.

One may adjudge the country's performance on foodgrains in three ways: compare India's average yield per hectare with the world average yield per hectare; India's percentage share in world production; and compare India's per capita annual average availability of foodgrains with the global figure. India lags far behind the world average yield.

Second, for wheat India shares 11.1 per cent of total world production and ranks third; for rice it shares 21.6 per cent of world production and ranks second; but for maize it shares just 1.7 per cent of world production and ranks seventh (with Romania).

This is not satisfactory in view of its large population, which constitutes about 17 per cent of world population. Third, in terms of per capita availability, India has only 176.3 kg of foodgrains a year (an average for 1999-2001) against the world average of 358.4 kg a year, though the minimum requirement in India according to the National Institute of Nutrition (Hyderabad) is 182.5 kg per head a year (that is, about half a kg daily).

Availability at local level

However, irrespective of the availability at the national level, unless foodgrains are available at the local village/panchayat store, the local market, the public distribution system outlet or the cooperative store, the farmers and labourers will not have physical access to it.

The third important aspect of food security is at the household level. It is a bitter fact that though India had 30 per cent of its grain production in public stock (over 60 million tonnes) in 2000, about 25 per cent of Indians were undernourished and food insecure. As the MSP is not adequate — nor are the purchase centres — farmers are compelled to sell paddy to local traders or 'net buyers' of villages. Therefore, as far as economic accessibility is concerned, people living below the poverty line (26 per cent) cannot afford to buy food.

The fourth aspect of food security is the consumption pattern for wellbeing at the intra-household level — there is often a visible discrimination against females, children, elderly, disabled, widows, wife and children of non-earning males and so on either due to scarcity of food in the family or discriminatory social practices or individual biases of the head of the family.

Finally, food absorption is another aspect of food security at the individual level. As some family members often do not get nutritious food in terms of required calories, there is an increase in the number of underweight children, children with stunted growth, diseases due to malnourishment, and infirmity leading to early mortality.

What is to be done?

A popular view has emerged, mostly in developing countries, that diversion of agricultural land for biofuel (ethanol) production should be reversed immediately, as it has led to 30 per cent increase in global food prices, pushing 30 million people worldwide into poverty. The solution however is not that straightforward.

We must ensure that the basic needs of all people are met in an integrated manner, and not merely as a risk management or relief measure. Development programmes/schemes like the National Rural Employment Guarantee, midday meals, ICDS, sanitation and hygiene should ensure supply of nutritious food and safe drinking water through entitlement card to promote inclusive social development.

Second, implementation should be decentralised through panchayats. Third, as adequate foodgrains are always available in government godowns, and given the increasing costs of storage, minimum foodgrains should be supplied even to the so-called 'Above Poverty Line' (APL) families; this would also prove more remunerative for PDS dealers as they will lift more quantities.

Fourth, there should be greater public investment in agriculture as nearly two-thirds of Indians are engaged in it. This must ensure bringing wasteland under cultivation as well as increasing yield per acre — production and productivity.

Various case studies have clearly found that public investment in infrastructure induces private investment in various agricultural activities.

Fifth, while agriculture subsidies (fertilisers) should continue, it should be shifted from chemical fertilisers to green and bio-fertilisers, from chemical pesticide/insecticide/weedicide to integrated pest management, from GM seeds to improved indigenous seeds, from flood irrigation to drip irrigation.

Traditional indigenous knowledge systems should be fully tapped. Thus a paradigm shift from green revolution to 'Evergreen Revolution', to use Prof M. S. Swaminathan's term, is called for.

(The authors are members of Indian Revenue Service and Indian Administrative Service respectively. The views are personal. blfeedback@thehindu.co.in)

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