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The story recurs, again and again. State granaries are full, the economy is resurgent and many of the world's wealthiest people are Indians. Yet grain rots, while one in every two Indian children is unable to access enough food for her body and brain to develop to her full potential it rots while millions are compelled to subsist for long periods without sufficient food, cutting back on their food intakes, sometimes reduced to eating one meal a day; or to beg for food; or to eat tubers, grasses and mango kernels that fill their stomachs but provide no nutrition; or sometimes just to drink the starch water left over after cooking rice, which their neighbours give them in tight-fisted charity.

No law can in itself end hunger. But it can compel governments to undertake a range of measures to prevent and address hunger. Children need nutrition, through support for breastfeeding in the early years, and supplementary feeding in pre-school centres and schools.

Women require maternity benefits, and nutrition support to single women. Aged people need adequate pensions, and some free cooked food in feeding centres. For urban migrants and homeless people, community kitchens offering affordable nutritious food are imperative in thousands in every city. For children lacking adult protection, like street children, a large network of government hostels alone can secure their food. For able bodied men and women, governments must guarantee employment at decent wages in both the countryside and cities; encourage agricultural production and procure farmers' produce at remunerative prices; redistribute land; and reach food to scarcity areas. And critical for all persons is subsidised rice and wheat but also pulses and oilseeds.

The battle, I believe, is not about whether millions of rupees of budgetary resources more or less should be invested in the food and livelihoods of the poor. The battle in the end is between two visions for India. One vision is founded on the belief that the best hope for all people, including the disadvantaged millions, is for governments to efficiently promote and facilitate markets. A resurgent private sector in a globalised economy would create wealth and jobs, and all would be better off in the long run. The other vision for the country rejects growth which excludes millions of our people and condemns them to sink deeper into want, hunger, debt, caste and communal discrimination, and patriarchy. It demands more compassionate economics, one in which 'people matter'. It believes that the State's highest duty is not to promote markets, but to invest in a better life for its disadvantaged citizens.

For those who transact only the language of growth, nutrition could also be seen as investment in people's bodies and minds, which would compound the benefits of India's demographic dividend, with young workers healthier and better fed, and their minds more developed, better equipped to compete in the contemporary global knowledge economy. Progressive economists also remind us that there are alternative growth paths to the dominant economic paradigm of profit-led growth. Fitter workers and more money in their hands could also spur what they call wage-led growth.

But the paramount argument for a comprehensive right to food law is not economic, or even political (that it will generate more votes). The imperative is ethical. Elie Wiesel, Holocaust survivor and Nobel laureate, observed with wisdom that was both grave and weighed down with sadness: 'The opposite of love is not hate. It is indifference.' In a country which for too long is scarred by its absence of outrage about and suffering with desperate inequality, the greatest imperative for a right to food law is to breach our collective indifference. There is a great gaping hole in our collective souls, which we must mend. The people of this ancient land must push into history the enormous silent hopeless agony of generations, over centuries, of the inability to feed one's loved ones and oneself.

In a land in which mammoth wealth and intense destitution have co-existed for millennia, a law that would bind governments to guarantee that no man, woman or child sleeps hungry could be momentous. But the official government draft of the food security bill is disappointingly minimalist.

It is not our claim that a comprehensive law placing such a range of obligations on governments would come cheap in a country of a billion plus people. Economists and

planners debate if we can afford the price-tag of a right to food law. I wonder how long we can afford not to pass such a statute, and continue to live indifferent to the untold suffering and injustice of preventable hunger.

The time has come for us to agree in this country on a floor of human dignity below which we will not allow any human being to fall. No child, woman or man in this land will sleep hungry. No person shall be forced to sleep under the open sky. No parent shall send their child out to work instead of to school. And no one shall die because they cannot afford the cost of hospitals and medicine. Can we agree that whatever this costs, we will pay? If accomplishing this requires the need to tax you and me more, so be it. Because not just those who suffer oppression and want, but you and I have a stake, a common stake in leaving to our children and grandchildren a more humane and egalitarian land.

Bio-fortified crops hold the key to food security, says expert

“It has become imperative in view of climate change”

The Hindu, Thiruvananthapuram, November 25, 2011

Bio-fortified varieties of staple food grains, such as Vitamin-A-enriched ‘Golden Rice’, or iron-enriched wheat, could improve the nutritional status of the world's poor, P. Pushpangadan, Director General, Amity Institute for Herbal and Biotech Products Development, said here on Thursday.

Presenting a paper on the “Recent advances of agricultural biotechnology in the light of climate change” at the 81st annual session of the National Academy of Sciences, India (NASI), he said the climate change challenge would require the development of a generation of new crops with enhanced mineral and vitamin content.

“Today, one billion people of the world are undernourished and more than a third are malnourished. As the population continues to increase, the looming threat of climate change will exasperate the situation even further. Bio-fortified foods can be easily incorporated into the dietary habits and farming programmes of the rural poor of the developing countries. People who have access to bio-fortified foods may be better prepared to withstand the deleterious effects of climate change on their livelihoods,” he explained.

Dr. Pushpangadan, former director of the Tropical Botanic Garden and Research Institute at Palode near here, said it was necessary to encourage countries to think proactively about the role technology could play in addressing food security and climate change and about its strong potential as an engine of economic growth. “Unfortunately, the lack of science-based regulations in many countries discourages innovation and adaptation and creates barriers to trade,” he said.

“By 2050, the global population will surpass 9 billion and require nearly a doubling of agricultural output to provide an adequate food supply. At the same time, the world's agricultural system will be increasingly challenged by water scarcity and climate change, raising the risk of production shortfalls in a world where over one billion people are already

undernourished. A challenge like this can be met through biotechnology, innovation, and appropriate agricultural development and trade policies”.

“It is becoming clear that climate change will be the most important constraint on our ability to feed ourselves in the coming decades. We must do everything we can to transform our food production system, to help combat global warming, and, at the same time, to feed ourselves in what will almost certainly be far less favourable conditions,” Dr. Pushpangadan said.

While it remained controversial in some policy arenas and the public forums, agricultural biotechnology had produced dramatic improvements in yield and had reduced production costs and input use intensity, he said.

Revised draft of food bill gives primacy to cash transfers, coupons

Gargi Parsai, The Hindu, NEW DELHI, November 24, 2011

Social activists up in arms against proposed reforms; impact on procurement feared

The government's new move to give primacy in the revised draft of the National Food Security Bill, 2011, to controversial schemes like cash transfers and issuance of food coupons to identified public distribution system beneficiaries in lieu of foodgrain entitlements has got social activists up in arms.

The scheme was introduced under 'Schedule II' in the initial draft of the Bill that was posted on the Food Ministry's website for public comments. It has now been inserted into the main body of the revised draft, as a whole new chapter (VII) linked to reforms in the public distribution system, giving a clear indication that the government is moving towards it.

Activist Biraj Patnaik termed it as “ridiculous” and said in a country that was high on gender inequality, where the rural banking system was in shambles and direct cash transfers in old-age, widow and disabled pension schemes had not been streamlined, this would adversely impact food procurement and minimum support price to farmers if beneficiaries were to buy supplies from the open market.

“The world over it is known that food is in the hands of women but cash is controlled by men who have different priorities on how to spend it.”

Explained Minister of State (Independent) for Food and Public Distribution K.V. Thomas: “We are not in favour of cash transfers. This has been included as part of the law so that there is no dispute on that later. It is a progressive reform.”

The reforms chapter also calls for leveraging 'aadhaar' for unique identification, with biometric information of entitled beneficiaries for proper targeting of benefits under the proposed Act linked to progressive reforms in the Targeted Public Distribution System.

Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission Montek Singh Ahluwalia has been most vociferous about both the ideas in public meetings.

The Bill, that calls for foodgrain entitlements at subsidised rates to up to 75 per cent of identified rural households and 50 per cent of urban families, lays much stress on "cost sharing" between the Centre and the States. It provides that not less than 46 per cent of rural and 28 per cent of urban households shall be designated as priority households. The survey to identify the beneficiaries is underway by the Ministry of Rural Development.

The financial implication of providing subsidised foodgrains under law is estimated at nearly Rs. one lakh crore, which would be approximately Rs. 30,000 crore higher than the current food subsidy of around Rs. 70,000 crore.

In addition, the revised draft provides for an expenditure of about Rs. 12,000 crore towards maternity benefit of Rs. 1000 per month for six months to pregnant and lactating mothers, which number was estimated at around 2.25 crore in 2010 under the Integrated Child Development Scheme. The cost of providing free (or at affordable price of estimated Rs. 10 per meal) is estimated to be around Rs. 9000 crore to five per cent of the priority population.

Besides this, the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperation has projected an expenditure of over Rs.1,00,000 crore towards incremental production of 20 to 25 million tonnes of foodgrains.

The Centre and States shall have to put in place an "internal grievance redress mechanism" including call centres, help lines, nodal officers and so on before a complaint is taken to the District Grievance Redress Officer or higher level.

The revised draft has been approved by Pranab Mukherjee as chairman of the Empowered Group of Ministers. It has now been circulated to related departments and will be put to the Union Cabinet for approval. "The Bill is expected to be introduced in Parliament by mid-December," Mr. Thomas indicated.

"Invest in nature to lift people out of poverty"

Julia Marton-Lefevre delivers the Millennium Lecture

The Hindu, November 22, 2011

Investing in nature can be a cost-effective strategy to lift people out of poverty and propel sustainable economic growth, as nature had the potential to offer solutions to the biggest development challenges, the Director-General of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Julia Marton-Lefevre, said here on Monday.

Delivering the Millennium Lecture organised by *The Hindu* Media Resource Centre, M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF), Ms. Marton-Lefevre said forest conservation and coastal protection by planting and preserving mangroves were examples of "nature-based solutions," but not every intervention related to nature could be considered one of them.

For instance, she said, one could ask under what conditions, if any, could industrially grown biodiesel be promoted as a "nature-based solution" to energy. "This is why IUCN is working on developing specific guidance on what type of interventions could (or should not) be considered as a nature-based solution. It must, for example, bring biodiversity and livelihood benefits, be cost-effective and replicable, and respect and reinforce communities' rights over natural resources," Ms. Marton-Lefevre said.

Giving examples of successful nature-based interventions, she said the IUCN and its member Winrock International India were working with forest-dependent local communities to turn natural resources into assets for livelihoods in Orissa. "In a zone between the Simlipal Tiger Reserve in Orissa and the hilly surrounding areas, forests contribute about 25 per cent of the average income, mostly through non-timber forest products," she said.

'Mangroves for the Future' was another IUCN-led initiative that deployed a nature-based solution by linking ecosystems to climate change and food security. The MSSRF was implementing a project that sought to make coastal aquaculture systems more sustainable and local communities more resilient, she said. The IUCN also believed in promoting equity and inclusion in conservation and it was working on mainstreaming gender issues in natural resources management from the local to the global level, she added.

Ms. Marton-Lefevre flagged a major governance issue – how to share the use and benefits derived from natural resources, especially since ecosystems do not recognise national boundaries. India and Bangladesh had a trans-boundary initiative – Ecosystems for Life – aimed at a greater understanding of the water issues in the river basin shared by the two countries.

Through the IUCN initiative, scientists from India and Bangladesh would join forces to strengthen their understanding of these shared ecosystems and contribute to their better management, she said.

She said the support of communications experts was needed to pass on the message of conservation to all citizens.

They should be made to understand that "we cannot continue to take nature's services for granted."

Noting that India would host the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity in October 2012, she said this was one of the first major events in the UN Decade on Biodiversity (2011-2020).

"The year 2020 is the new global deadline to halt the loss of the amazing variety of life on Earth. Will we meet this deadline?" she asked.

In his observations, MSSRF chairman M.S. Swaminathan said high levels of inequalities were leading to protests in the Arab world, as well as in the United States, giving credence to the view that both unsustainable consumption and unacceptable poverty were dangerous.

Endorsing the view that nature-based solutions had a positive impact on ecosystems, he said MSSRF's experience had shown that mangroves acted as speed-breakers during tsunamis and cyclones and provided coastal protection.

Eco-sensitive zone around Bandipur Tiger Reserve opposed

Divya Gandhi – The Hindu - Bangalore, November 8, 2011



The decision on an ESZ around the Bandipur Tiger Reserve has drawn flak from various quarters. Gundlupet MLA H.S. Mahadeva Prasad had written to the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests saying the local people were not consulted during the drafting of the notification.

Plans to create eco-sensitive zones (ESZs) around national parks in Karnataka have come under fire from gram panchayats and political leaders who have pointed to legal violations that the ESZ notification entailed.

Even as the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) fields questions about the wisdom of declaring an ESZ over a 10-km radius around Nagarahole National Park, the Mangala Gram Panchayat, near the Bandipur Tiger Reserve, on Sunday submitted a memorandum to the Ministry objecting to an ESZ proposed here.

The gram panchayat, in its memorandum, describes the decision as having been arrived at in a “totally autocratic and undemocratic manner”. It adds that the ESZ violates existing laws, including the Wildlife Protection Act 1972 and the Forest Rights Act 2006.

While the Forest Rights Act 2006 envisages the gram sabha as a statutory authority with powers over the management of forests, the seven-member monitoring committee proposed in the draft ESZ notification are all government officials from the departments of Environment, Urban Development, Revenue, and Forests, the Karnataka Pollution Control Board, and two non-officials from the NGOs, and an expert on ecology, says the memorandum.

In a similar objection to the Bandipur ESZ proposal, Gundlupet MLA, H.S. Mahadeva Prasad, wrote to the MoEF on October 21 pointing out that the local people were not consulted during the drafting of the notification. He also contended that the Karnataka Panchayat Raj Act 1986 specifies that any activity earmarked for the village has to first be approved by the gram sabha.

The notification has several “impracticable” recommendations, he said.

For instance, several activities will be prohibited or regulated in the 138 villages that fall within the proposed ESZ, such as change of land use from agricultural activity, groundwater harvesting, fencing of premises, establishment of poultry and livestock farms, and maintaining village roads.

The Mangala Gram Panchayat's letter contends that the ESZ will encompass the ‘critical tiger habitat’ which itself was “illegally” declared without the consent of the gram sabha concerned, as required by the WLPA.

Only last week, MoEF was forced to respond to the Kodagu Zilla Panchayat that opposed an eco-sensitive zone proposed around Nagarhole National Park fearing an impact on livelihoods among other concerns. Activities in the eco-sensitive zones “would be of a regulatory nature rather than prohibitive nature,” the Ministry said.
