

## POVERTY AND RIGHT TO FOOD IN INDIA

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### ABSTRACT

*Article 21 of the Constitution of India provides the Right to Life to all the citizens of India that includes the Right to Food. Still, India is struggling at 55th position out of 76 selected countries in Global Hunger Index, 2014. In a bid to ward off criticism, the governments keep on changing the criteria of poverty estimation. The official poverty lines give command over time to a lower and lower standard of living. With a steadily lowered standard, the poverty figures will always show apparent improvement even when actual deprivation is worsening. The importance of arriving at realistic poverty line and estimating poverty ratios using realistic lines is obvious. The paper is an attempt to encapsulate the debate around the estimation of poverty lines and their insufficiency in identifying the destitute families. The country requires right-based approach and universal entitlements insofar as basic rights – food, education and health – are concerned, to come out of the current morass.*

**Keywords:** Global Hunger Index (GHI), right to life, National Food Security Act, 2013, poverty measurement, Headcount Ratios (HCR), Tendulkar Committee Report, Rangarajan Committee Report, 2009.

### INTRODUCTION

Article 21 of the Constitution of India provides the Right to Life to all the citizens of India including the Right to Food<sup>1</sup>. Further, Article 47 of the Constitution, inter alia, provides that the State shall regard raising the level of nutrition and the standard of living of its people and the improvement of public health as among its primary duties. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, to which India is a signatory, also cast responsibilities on all State parties to recognize the right of everyone to adequate food. Eradicating extreme poverty and hunger is one of the goals under the Millennium Development Goals of the United Nations. In pursuance of the constitutional obligations and obligations under the international conventions, providing food security is imperative to Government's planning and policy<sup>2</sup>.

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India stands at the 65th spot among 79 nations listed by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) in Global Hunger Index (GHI) report 2012<sup>3</sup>. In 2013, it was at 63<sup>rd</sup> position. In the year 2014, India climbed up fast to 55<sup>th</sup> position. GHI is calculated by considering two factors apart from child malnourishment: child mortality rate and the proportion of the population considered calorie-deficient. IFPRI reports that the low socioeconomic and health status of women has been pushing the child malnourishment figure up. In India, 43.5 percent of children under five are underweight. According to the latest data on child under-nutrition, from 2005–10, India ranked second to last on child underweight out of 129 countries.<sup>4</sup> Although India is seen as a rising economic power and it is hoped that a trickle down will benefit the poor and marginalized; in reality the gap between the rich and the poor is growing. In her book "*The Republic of Hunger*" (2008), Utsa Patnaik concluded that on an average, a family of 5 consume 100 kilograms of grain less per year as compared to the consumption during the Second World War<sup>5</sup>. This is the spectre of starving India. Over half the children in India are malnourished and about one-quarter are so severely malnourished that they have shrunken brains and stunted bodies. A new generation of millions of Indians will grow to adulthood disabled. More than half of all women are anaemic with pregnant and lactating women suffering severe anaemia and malnutrition. About 3000 starvation deaths every year are documented by NGOs. The vast majority of those dying by starvation are scheduled caste and scheduled tribes.<sup>6</sup>

The Right to Food is about freedom from hunger. In a narrow sense, hunger refers to the pangs of an empty stomach. Correspondingly, the right to food can be understood, roughly speaking, as the right to have two square meals a day throughout the year. In a broader sense, hunger refers to undernutrition which then links with a wide range of entitlements, not only to food itself but also to other requirements of good nutrition such as clean water, health care, and even elementary education. However, the right to food in the narrow sense also deserves close attention, given the availability of enormous food stocks in the country<sup>7</sup>. These food stocks present a unique opportunity to ensure that nobody goes to bed hungry<sup>8</sup>. Ensuring food security, however, has always been a challenge and *The Right to Food* case<sup>9</sup> began with the plight of drought-affected people and mass starvation deaths when the food coffers of the Govt were overflowing<sup>10</sup>. The highest court agreed that the State was indeed responsible for providing nutrition and public health. The most persuasive argument to the court was that the Right to Food is directly related to the constitutional guarantee of Right to Life.

The National Food Security Act, 2013 attempts to shift the debate from starvation and subsistence to dignity and justice. It marks a paradigm shift in addressing the problem of food security – *from the current welfare approach to a right based approach*. The objective of the act is to "*provide for food and nutritional security in human life cycle approach, by ensuring access to adequate quantity of quality food at affordable prices to people to live a life with dignity and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto*". About two-third of the population are entitled to receive subsidized food grains so that nutritional status of the population, and especially of women and children, can be improved to enhance the quality of human resource of the country.

Another important aspect of removing hunger is how to identify the hungry. Poverty is a multi-dimensional<sup>11</sup> phenomenon and hunger is undoubtedly the most crucial of its compo-

nents. Hence, in order to identify the hungry, we need to identify the poor, the beneficiaries under the Act. Therefore, analyzing and understanding the way poverty is measured in India becomes imperative.

## **MEASURING POVERTY IN INDIA**

The official Indian poverty measures, released by the Planning Commission, are based on consumer expenditure surveys conducted by the National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) and are measured as Headcount Ratios (HCR) i.e. the ratio of the number of poor to the total population. A poor household is defined as a household with an expenditure level below a specific poverty line. The Planning Commission has periodically estimated poverty lines and poverty ratios for each of the years for which Large Sample Surveys on Household Consumer Expenditure have been conducted by the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) of the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation. These surveys are normally conducted on quinquennial basis.

Since the poverty line in India is based on consumption, not income, it obfuscates dependence on debt, use of common property resources, and informal social security. The poverty line, quantified as a number is reductionist. It does not capture important aspects of poverty — ill health, low educational attainments, geographical isolation, ineffective access to law, powerlessness in civil society, caste and/or gender based disadvantages, etc. In spite of the diversity of opinion among experts on the methodology of measuring poverty and its criticism, the importance of quantifying it has been well recognised, especially since poverty alleviation and reduction is a national goal. Defining a poverty line is the first step in estimating poverty. A poverty line dividing the poor from the non-poor is used by putting a price on the minimum required consumption levels of food, clothing, shelter, fuel and health care, etc.

### **Working Group, 1962**

The definition of poverty line in the Indian context was attempted for the first time in 1962 by a Working Group of eminent Economists and social thinkers after taking into account the recommendations of the Nutrition Advisory Committee of the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR, 1958) regarding balanced diet. The Working Group recommended (in 1962) that the national minimum for each household of 5 persons should be not less than Rs. 100 per month in terms of 1960-61 prices or Rs.20 per capita. For urban areas it was Rs.125 per month per household or Rs.25 per capita. This national minimum excluded expenditure on health and education, both of which are expected to be provided by the state.

### **Dandekar and Rath, 1973<sup>12</sup>**

In their seminal work on poverty, the two economists used an average calorie norm of 2,250 calories per capita per day for both rural and urban areas, as a criterion to define the poverty line. On the basis of National Sample Survey data on consumer expenditure, the study

revealed that, in rural area, the households with an annual per capita expenditure of Rs. 180 or Rs. 15 per month at the 1960-61 prices consumed on an average food with calorie equivalent of 2,250 per capita per day together with such non- food items as they chose. The corresponding figures in the urban area were Rs.270 per annum or Rs.22.50 per month at 1960-61 prices.

### **Task Force on Projections of Minimum Needs and Effective Consumption Demand, 1979**

The methodology as formulated by the Task Force' was used till 1993 in estimating the incidence of poverty in Planning Commission. The Task Force (1979) defined the poverty line as the per-capita expenditure level at which the average per-capita, per day calorie intake was 2400 calories in rural areas and 2100 calories for urban areas. The Task Force used the age, sex, activity specific calorie allowances recommended by the Nutrition Expert Group (1968) to estimate the average daily per capita requirements for rural and urban areas. Based on the observed consumer behaviour in 1973-74 it was estimated that, on an average, consumer expenditure of Rs.49.09 per capita per month was sufficient for a calorie intake of 2400 calories per capita per day in rural areas and Rs.56.64 per capita per month for a calorie intake of 2100 per day in urban areas. Thus, the concept of poverty line used here was partly normative and partly behavioural. This way of deriving the poverty line, does not seek to measure the nutritional status, and more specifically the incidence of malnourishment or under-nourishment in the population. It focuses rather on the purchasing power needed to meet the specific calorie intake standard with some margin for non-food consumption needs.

### **Lakdawala Committee, 1993**

In September 1989, the Planning Commission again constituted an Expert Group to consider methodological and computational aspects of estimation of proportion and number of poor in India and "to look into the methodology for estimation of poverty at national and state level and also to go into the question of re-defining poverty line, if necessary." They advised that the poverty line approach anchored in a calorie norm and associated with a fixed consumption basket should be continued. The commodity basket was standardised at the national level and applied to all States. 1973-74 was continued as the base year for estimating the poverty line. They relied on disaggregated commodity indices from Consumer Price Index for Agricultural Labourers (CPI-AL) to update the rural poverty line and a simple average of suitably weighted commodity indices of Consumer Price Index for Industrial Workers (CPI-IW) and Consumer Price Index of Non-manual Employees (CPI-NM) for updating the urban poverty line.

### **Tendulkar Committee Report, 2009**

The current methodology for poverty estimation is based on the recommendations of Tendulkar Committee which submitted its report in 2009 and was accepted by the Planning Commission in 2010. The estimation of poverty continues to be based on private household consumer expenditure of Indian households as collected by the NSSO. The expert group decided

to move away from anchoring the poverty lines to a calorie *intake* as calorie consumption were not found to be well correlated with the *nutritional outcome*. They decided to adopt the MRP-based<sup>13</sup> estimates of consumption expenditure as the basis for future poverty lines as against the previous practice of using Uniform reference period estimates of consumption expenditure.<sup>14</sup> Even while moving away from the calorie norms, they revised minimum calorie intake to 1776 calories per capita for urban population and 1999 calories per capita for rural population. Separate allowance for private expenditure on transport and conveyance was also recommended. The new poverty lines enable rural as well as urban population in all the states to afford the recommended *all-India urban PLB* after taking due account of within-state and inter-state differentials incorporating observed consumer behaviour both at the all-India and state levels.

Major departures from 1993 Expert Group are

- Moved away from calorie anchor but test for the adequacy of actual food expenditure near the poverty line to ensure certain aggregate nutritional outcomes.
- Uniform PLB based in the latest available observed household consumption data to both the rural and the urban populations.
- Inclusion of provision in price indices for private expenditure on health and education in rural and urban PLB.

NSSO did the large scale survey in 2011-12 (NSS 68th round). The summary results of this survey were released on 20th June 2013. The percentage of persons below the Poverty Line in 2011-12 has been estimated as 25.7% in rural areas, 13.7% in urban areas and 21.9% for the country as a whole. The respective ratios for the rural and urban areas were 41.8% and 25.7% and 37.2% for the country as a whole in 2004-05. It was 50.1% in rural areas, 31.8% in urban areas and 45.3% for the country as a whole in 1993-94. In 2011-12, India had 270 million persons below the Tendulkar Poverty Line as compared to 407 million in 2004-05, that is a reduction of 137 million persons over the seven year period<sup>15</sup>.

**Table 1: National poverty estimates (% below poverty line) (1993 – 2012)**

Year	Rural	Urban	Total
1993 – 94	50.1	31.8	45.3
2004 – 05	41.8	25.7	37.2
2009 – 10	33.8	20.9	29.8
2011 – 12	25.7	13.7	21.9

In India, if street children and homeless people earn about Rs 100 a day, this makes them five times above the poverty line, even though many of them do not have shelter and live in dismal conditions. This is because in India, according to Tendulkar Report, a poor is one who earns below Rs. 32.16 per day in urban areas and Rs.26.03 in rural areas( Rs.4,824 for a family of five in urban areas and about Rs.3,905 for a family of five in rural areas.)<sup>16</sup>. The current official poverty line seems more like the destitution line. Reaching the poverty line is not a guarantee of being well nourished (since good nutrition requires much more than calorie

adequacy), let alone healthy or well educated. The Tendulkar Committee Report further complicated matters by claiming, for the first time, that the poverty line ensures '*adequacy of actual private expenditure... on food, education and health*'. That the Tendulkar poverty line is wholly insufficient for this purpose is self-evident from a common sense point of view. Moreover the calorie norms relate to an average for the reference group and not the minimum required for biological existence, given that there is a considerable variation in calorie requirement of individuals depending on their workload, age, sex and activity status.

The NCEUS (Arjun Sengupta) report had stated that nearly 77% of India's people, totaling 836 million people, with an income roughly below \$2 in PPP terms were living in a highly vulnerable condition, spending less than Rs 20 a day<sup>17</sup>. The World Bank's PPP estimate of Indian poverty was higher than 40% in 2005, while the Asian Development Bank arrived at almost 50%. The UNDP's Multidimensional Poverty Index finds the proportion of the poor in India at a staggering 53% and concludes that the poorest region in South Asia is Bihar followed by Southern parts of Afghanistan.<sup>18</sup>

According to the 15th ILC<sup>19</sup>, the following criteria were considered in calculating the minimum wage which is an euphemism for '*living wage*':

- Standard working class family is assumed to include two adults and two children;
- Minimum food requirement to be taken as a balanced diet of 2,700 calories per day per consumption unit;
- Clothing requirement to be based on per capita consumption of 18 yards per annum, which gives 72 yards per annum for the average worker's family;
- For housing, the rent corresponding to the minimum area provided for under the government's industrial housing schemes should be taken;
- Fuel, lighting and other items of expenditure should constitute 20 per cent of the total minimum wage.

While the government did not accept these recommendations, the Supreme Court approved these norms through its judgment in the case of *U Unichoyi vs State of Kerala*<sup>20</sup>, and in *Reptakos Brett Vs Workmen*<sup>21</sup> added another norm: 25% of the total minimum wage, to cover children's education, medical treatment, recreation, festivals and ceremonies. These 'minimum' wages and poverty benchmarks are to be seen in the context of the soaring inflation and rise in prices of food and other essentials. A "living wage", at current wage rates declared under the Minimum Wages Act, comes to Rs 247 per day for unskilled labour. The poverty line is seven times less than the minimum wage which itself is a "subsistence wage"<sup>22</sup>. On the rural side a "Below the Poverty Line" (BPL) Census is being conducted by the Ministry of Rural Development every five years, beginning in 1992. The criterion for identifying rural poor, however, has varied from Census to Census. With a view to evolving a standard methodology, the Ministry of Rural Development constituted an Expert Group under the Chairmanship of N.C. Saxena in 2009. With the objective of putting in place a uniform criteria to identify the

BPL households in urban areas so that objectivity and transparency is ensured in delivery of benefits to the target groups, the Planning Commission constituted an Expert Group<sup>23</sup> under the Chairmanship of S.R. Hashim in 2012.

Under attack for its poverty lines, the Planning Commission admitted that the benchmark was "very low," but "factual". In a joint statement issued by Montek Singh Ahluwalia, Deputy Chairman, Planning Commission and Jairam Ramesh in 2011, they said,

*"The present State-wise poverty estimates using the Planning Commission's methodology will not be used to impose any ceiling on the number of households to be included in different government programmes. The new methodology for determining poor households in rural areas would be based on the socio-economic caste census that is expected to be completed by January 2012. The census would take into account deprivations based on seven indicators worked out by the Rural Development Ministry. A similar census in urban areas would be undertaken later."*<sup>24</sup>

On 3rd October, 2011, Montek Singh Ahluwalia said in a Press Conference :

*"It needs to be emphasised that the Tendulkar poverty line is not meant to be an acceptable level of living for the aam aadmi. It is actually the standard of living of those at the poverty line in 1973-74. This is clearly a level below which families are under severe stress, which is the basis of giving them exceptional support as embedded in various poverty amelioration policies including subsidised food and other facilities. The level is low and therefore families slightly above the poverty line are also vulnerable. Recognising this reality, it is certainly not the view of the present Planning Commission that subsidised food should be limited only to those below the poverty line. Eligibility for subsidised food and other benefits will be widened to a much larger population, delinked from the poverty line."*<sup>25</sup>

Therefore, we see an indirect admission by the Government that their poverty figures are not actually reflective of the reality in our country when it comes to covering basic human needs.

Under attack from the media, civil society and many individuals, the Government constituted another Committee under C. Rangarajan (former Chairperson of the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council) to reassess poverty estimation.

### **Rangarajan Committee Report, 2014**

The Committee deliberated upon the following matters:

- (i) To provide an alternate method to estimate poverty levels and examine whether poverty lines should be fixed solely in terms of a consumption basket or if other criteria are also relevant;
- (ii) To examine divergence between the consumption estimates based on the NSSO methodology and those emerging from the National Accounts aggregates;
- (iii) To review international poverty estimation methods and indicate whether based on

these, a particular method for empirical poverty estimation can be developed in India, and;

- (iv) To recommend how estimates of poverty can be linked to eligibility and entitlements under the various schemes of the Government of India.<sup>26</sup>

Dr. Rangarajan and the Expert Group under him dismissed the methodology adopted by the Tendulkar Committee and put the number of poor in India in 2011-12 at 29.5%(21.9% according to Tendulkar Committee's estimates) of the total population. That means 3 people out of every 10 in India are poor. As per Rangarajan Committee, a person spending less than Rs 1,407 a month (Rs 47/day, earlier Rs 33/day) would be considered poor in urban areas. In villages, those spending less than Rs 972 a month (Rs 32/day, earlier Rs 27/day) would be considered poor. Defending his poverty estimates he said, "*The World Bank also talks about: purchasing power parity terms. The minimum expenditure per day. They are talking about USD 2 per day whereas our estimate comes to USD 2.4. Therefore it (our poverty estimates) is in keeping with the international standards*". He said that instead of isolating the number at which poverty is pegged people should see the expenditure as one which is made by a household together in a month which is estimated at Rs 4,860 in villages and Rs 7,035 for cities for a family of five people.<sup>27</sup>

Drawbacks of the recommendations can be delineated as follow:

1. It is still anchored in the consumption expenditure method and fails to acknowledge the multi-dimensional nature of poverty.
2. It has lowered the minimum calorie intake requirement which might lead to poverty being underestimated.
3. It doesn't take into account the varied food and dietary habits of the people and links poverty to consumption of only on three basic nutrients (calories, proteins, fats).

But, even though beneficiaries under the NFSA were delinked from poverty lines, yet, their identification under the Act still suffers from many incongruities and due to lack of a better alternative fall back again upon arbitrary and unscientific determination.

### **Identification of Beneficiaries under National Food Security Act, 2013**

The National Food Security Act under Section 2(3) talks of '*eligible households*' divided into 'priority households' and the 'households covered under Antyodaya Anna Yojana'<sup>28</sup>. Further, Section 3(2) ensures food security to the eligible households at subsidised prices up to seventy-five per cent of the rural population and up to fifty per cent of the urban population. Chapter 6 mentions about Identification of beneficiaries. Section 9 stipulates that the percentage coverage under the TPDS in rural and urban areas for each State shall be determined by the Central Government and the total number of persons to be covered in such rural and urban areas of the State shall be calculated on the basis of the population census. Section 10 mentions that the State Government shall, within the number of persons determined under Section 9 for the rural and urban areas, identify—

- a. The households to be covered under the Antyodaya Anna Yojna;
- b. The remaining households as priority households to be covered under the Targeted Public Distribution System, in accordance with such guidelines as the State Government may specify.

In other words the central government will indicate the percentage of the entitled population, while the actual identification of the beneficiaries will be the responsibility of the states. The entire focus of the operational part of the proposed Act is on TPDS, which will provide food grains to households identified as living Below the Poverty Line (BPL) on the basis of the latest available poverty estimates notified by the Planning Commission. The Act does not prescribe any scientific or established mechanism for identification of beneficiaries and the multiplicity of categories is bound to lead to several identification errors.

These weaknesses in identifying beneficiaries by way of BPL census are sought to be corrected by determining eligibility for the priority category in a more scientific way by a Socio-Economic and Caste Economic Census (SECC) conducted by the States on the basis of parameters of deprivation determined by Ministry of Rural Development. However, the SECC is far from complete, so far only about 68 per cent survey is completed and there is no time frame within which the survey will be completed<sup>29</sup> and in the absence of any obvious alternative, it is effectively falling back on the Below Poverty Line census to identify priority groups.

The distinction between 'priority' and 'general' households in the Act is wholly unnecessary and counter-productive. As it is, 25 per cent of rural households are entirely excluded from the public distribution system and it is unnecessary to split the rest into two groups. The Act seems to create a justiciable entitlement but doesn't guarantee a person that he or she is eligible for it. Until now, the main beneficiaries of the PDS were '*below poverty line*' families. A census was conducted every few years to identify BPL families, based on some sort of scoring system. The cut-off scores were supposed to be set state-wise in such a manner that the proportion of families with a score below the cut-off (i.e. BPL families) matches the proportion of families *below the poverty line* according to the Planning Commission's poverty estimates. 'Priority groups' are not fundamentally different from BPL households, and the Socio-Economic and Caste Census, which seems to be expected to identify priority households, is much the same as earlier BPL censuses.

## **SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND CASTE CENSUS, 2011**

The last *below poverty line* census was conducted in 2002. The Planning Commission provides estimates of the percentage of the rural and urban population living below the poverty line in different States/UTs. That is, it estimates the "how much" of poverty. The SECC, 2011 on the other hand, provides information on the "who" of the population living below the poverty line. Thus, for example, the Planning Commission estimate for a State could be that say 55% of the rural population and say 30% of the urban population living below the poverty line. SECC, 2011 will enable that particular State to identify the households who comprise this 55% and 30% respectively.

**Rural areas:** The methodology for rural areas has been using the recommendations of the Saxena Expert Group as the reference point<sup>30</sup>.

**Urban areas:** The Planning Commission appointed the Hashim Committee Expert Group to identify the methodology to conduct the SECC in urban areas. The 61st Round of the NSSO shows that urban poverty has registered a decline in percentage terms; however, it has increased in absolute terms by 4.4 million persons. The fact is that the number of urban poor is rising continuously since 1973–74 as per the uniform recall period.<sup>31</sup>

Rural Households will be ranked through a three-step process. A household with any of the following will be excluded automatically:

- Motorized two/three/four wheeler/ fishing boat;
- Mechanized three/four wheeler agricultural equipment;
- Kisan Credit Card with credit limit of Rs. 50,000 and above;
- Household with any member as a Government employee;
- Households with non-agricultural enterprises registered with the Government;
- Any member of the family earning more than Rs. 10,000 per month;
- Paying income tax;
- Paying professional tax;
- Three or more rooms with all rooms having pucca walls and roof;
- Own a refrigerator;
- Own Landline phone;
- Own 2.5 acres or more of irrigated land with at least 1 irrigation equipment;
- 5 acres or more of irrigated land for two or more crop seasons;
- Owning at least 7.5 acres of land or more with at least one irrigation equipment.

A household with any of the following will be included automatically:

- Households without shelter;
- Destitute/ living on alms;
- Manual scavengers;
- Primitive tribal groups;
- Legally released bonded labourers.

The remaining households will be ranked using 7 Deprivation Indicators. Households with the highest deprivation score will have the highest priority for inclusion in the list of households below the poverty level. The following are the deprivation indicators:

- Households with only one room, kucha walls and kucha roof;

- No adult member between the ages of 16 and 59;
- Female headed households with no adult male member between 16 and 59;
- Households with disabled member and no able bodied adult member;
- SC/ST households;
- Households with no literate adult above 25 years;
- Landless households deriving a major part of their income from manual casual labour.<sup>32</sup>

After ranking households in this manner, a cut-off is supposed to be applied to identify 'priority' households – the main beneficiaries of the public distribution system under the NFSA. For instance, if the cut-off is two, then priority households will consist of all households with a score of two or more. The cut-off is supposed to be specified so that the share of priority households in the population is around 46 per cent i.e the proportion of the rural population below the 'Tendulkar poverty line' with a small margin for targeting errors.

Let us consider the following 3 examples for clear delineation of criteria :

**Meena**, aged 50, lives in a two-room *kaccha* hut with her disabled husband who studied up to class 2. They own half an acre of unirrigated land and a goat. Meena is unable to take up any remunerative work as her husband needs constant care. Without any specific means of subsistence, they live on one meal a day. **Zafar**, aged 35, never went to school but he learnt to read and write in a night school. Aside from harvesting the odd sack of grain from his small patch of land, he earns a pittance as a weaver. The family is struggling to make ends meet and two of his five children work as child labourers. **Jeetu**, aged 45, lives on his own – his family earning more than 10 thousand per month deserted him as he suffers from HIV/AIDS. He has been left to his own devices, in a one-room brick shed on the outskirts of the village. He is too weak to work. Compassionate villagers give him rice from time to time, with some vegetables on festivals.

What do these people have in common? Each of them belongs to a 'zero score' household – a household that will get a score of zero in the Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC), if the census reaches them at all. Since Meena, Zafar and Jeetu have a score of zero, they are *certain to be left out* from the priority list, even before the census begins. Even though they are fictional characters but it would be easy to find real-life examples of such situations, or of other stark cases of poor – even destitute – households being left out of the priority list because they have a zero score. In fact, even households with a score of one are almost bound to be left out, since the cut-off is unlikely to be less than two.

The odd nature of this scoring system can be appreciated in more general terms by considering Adivasi (tribal) households – the most disadvantaged section of the rural population. Since most Adivasi households possess a little bit of land, however unproductive, and a house (often a mud house) with at least two rooms, the first and last 'deprivations' in the list will not apply to them (note that even land possessed as a matter of traditional rights, without legal title, is to be counted as 'owned' by the SECC). Further, since a large majority are likely to

have at least one able-bodied male adult aged between 16 and 59 years, the second, third and fourth criteria will not apply to them either. It follows that most Adivasi households will have a score of only *one*, unless they are 'lucky' enough to have no literate adult, in which case their score will shoot up to two. But even a score of two may not catapult them into the priority club. And if it does, Adivasi communities will be oddly split down the middle, between 'score one' and 'score two' families – a very divisive situation.<sup>33</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The fact is that official poverty lines give command over time to a lower and lower standard of living. With a steadily lowered standard, the poverty figures will always show apparent improvement even when actual deprivation is worsening. The importance of arriving at realistic poverty lines and estimating poverty ratios using realistic lines is obvious. All current official welfare schemes, whether they give access to affordable food through the PDS or access to affordable medical insurance through the Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana (RSBY), rely on identifying beneficiaries using the official poverty estimates. Given that these are gross underestimates of the true extent of poverty, a much larger number of deserving families are excluded than are included at present<sup>34</sup>.

While academic debates can continue on the appropriate measure of poverty in India, its extent and whether it is decreasing over time, it is unacceptable and counterproductive to link the official poverty estimates to basic entitlements of the people, especially access to food. Food security should be provided to all citizens, not a particular group that can vary according to administrative decisions because a rights-based approach cannot assign a basic human right to only a subset of the population, however defined. Irrespective of the methodology we adopt to measure poverty, the number of poor and hungry people in the country remains large.

Since several representations were made suggesting that the Tendulkar Poverty Line was too low, the Planning Commission, in June 2012, constituted an Expert Group under the Chairmanship of Dr. C. Rangarajan to once again review the methodology for the measurement of poverty which has submitted its report on 30<sup>th</sup> June 2014<sup>35</sup>. With the 12th Plan, the government has taken the first steps in acknowledging that poverty is a multi-dimensional concept that cannot be reduced to consumption expenditure alone.<sup>36</sup>

The way forward is not to 'fix the poverty numbers' but to find a way out of this bankrupt approach of BPL targeting. What is needed to widen universal entitlement programmes such as Mid-Day Meals, the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. Beyond this, there is a need for informed debate on the future of social support in India. The country cannot afford divisive, unreliable and exclusionary system of targeted transfers that self-liquidates over time. It is necessary to build a comprehensive social security system inspired by constitutional principles, fundamental rights, and ideals of solidarity and universalism. The whole experience of the last twenty years is that over-reliance on economic growth for social progress is a recipe for disappointment. The recent discussion has made it clear that a consensus is emerging in favour of universal entitlements insofar as basic rights – food, education and health – are concerned.

## ENDNOTES AND REFERENCES

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5. Utsa Patnaik(2008). *Republic of Hunger and Other Essays Hunger, malnutrition and Starvation Deaths*. Delhi: Three Essays Collective.
6. <http://www.hrln.org/hrln/right-to-food.html>
7. The average annual procurement, which was 382.2 lakh tons, i.e. 24.30% of the average annual production during 2000-2001 to 2006-07, has gone up to 602.4 lakh tons during 2007-08 to 2011-12, i.e 33.24% of the average annual production. <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/erelease.aspx?relid=97045>
8. Jean Dreze, *Right To Food: From The Courts To The Streets*, <http://www.righttofoodindia.org/data/dreze-courts.pdf>
9. PUCL v. UOI W.P(C)No. 196 of 2001
10. In 2001, there was a scandal as the country was bursting at the seams with 60m tonnes of stored food grains and yet starvation, death and migration afflicted six states. The People's Union for Civil Liberties sued the government, arguing that it must open its grain reserves to feed the hungry.
11. The Global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) measures poverty in a multi-dimensional way faced by each poor person at the same time. It measures levels of deprivation in education, health and other aspects of living standards. It reflects both incidence of MPI and intensity of poverty. It measures poverty across 100 developing countries. There are ten indicators of poverty-Nutrition, Child Mortality, Years of schooling, School attendance, Cooking fuel, Sanitation, Water, Electricity, Floor, and Assets. If someone is deprived in a third or more of ten (weighted) indicators, he/she is poor and the number of deprivations they experience measures the intensity of poverty. The new MPI was developed and applied by Oxford Poverty and Human Development Index with support from United Nations Development Program. It supplants the Human Poverty Index introduced in 1997.
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13. Under Mixed Recall Period (MRP), information on five broad item groups of household consumer expenditure with low frequency of purchase (low frequency items for short) namely, clothing, footwear, education, institutional medical care and durables is collected on a year-long recall basis while information on consumption expenditure on all other items is collected on the basis of a month-long recall period. In the case of URP, all information on consumption expenditure is collected on a month-long recall period basis.
14. NSSO was advised to shift to Mixed Reference Period (MRP) for all its consumption surveys in future, namely, 365 days for low frequency items (clothing, footwear, durables, education and institutional health expenditure) and 30 days for all the remaining items. This change captures the household consumption expenditure of the poor households on low-frequency items of purchase more satisfactorily than the earlier 30 day recall period.
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18. Multidimensional Poverty Index 2014, Highlights- South Asia, 22 June 2015, [http://www.ophi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/MPI2015-SOUTH-ASIA-HIGHLIGHTS\\_June.pdf?6b8d26](http://www.ophi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/MPI2015-SOUTH-ASIA-HIGHLIGHTS_June.pdf?6b8d26). Also see, S Mahendra Dev, *Poverty line: Usefulness of poverty data* Mar 28, 2012, Accessed at [http://articles.economicstimes.indiatimes.com/2012-03-28/news/31249555\\_1\\_poverty-ratio-tendulkar-committee-rural-areas](http://articles.economicstimes.indiatimes.com/2012-03-28/news/31249555_1_poverty-ratio-tendulkar-committee-rural-areas)
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27. Rangarajan Defends Poverty Estimates (July 7, 2014) in *The Hindu*, <http://www.thehindu.com/business/Economy/rangarajan-defends-poverty-estimates/article6186614.ece>
28. AAY is a step in the direction of making TPDS aim at reducing hunger among the poorest segments of the BPL population. A National Sample Survey Exercise points towards the fact that about 5% of the total population in the country sleeps without two square meals a day. This section of the population can be called as "hungry". In order to make TPDS more focused and targeted towards this category of population, the "Antyodaya Anna Yojana" (AAY) was launched in December, 2000 for one crore poorest of the poor families. In order to identify these households, the guidelines stipulate the following criteria: Landless agriculture labourers, marginal farmers, rural artisans/craftsmen, such as potters, tanners, weavers, blacksmiths, carpenters, slum dwellers, and persons earning their livelihood on daily basis in the informal sector like porters, coolies, rickshaw pullers, hand cart pullers, fruit and flower sellers, snake charmers, rag pickers, cobblers, destitute and other similar categories irrespective of rural or urban areas, Households headed by widows or terminally ill persons/disabled persons/persons aged 60 years or more with no assured means of subsistence or societal support, Widows or terminally ill persons or disabled persons or persons aged 60 years or more or single women or single men with no family or societal support or assured means of subsistence, All primitive tribal households. *Source: Introduction to TDPS*, Dept. Of Food and Public Distribution <http://dfpd.nic.in/?q=node/101>
29. 27<sup>th</sup> Report of Standing Committee On Food, Consumer Affairs And Public Distribution (2012-13) on The National Food Security Bill, 2011 released on 17.01.2013, Ministry Of Consumer Affairs, Food And Public Distribution <http://164.100.47.134/Isscommittee/Food,%20Consumer%20Affairs%20&%20Public%20Distribution/Final%20Report%20on%20NFSB.pdf>
30. Information collected at the level of the individual and household, including Occupation, Education, Disability, Religion, SC/ST Status, Name of Caste/Tribe, Employment, Income and source of income, Assets, Housing, Consumer Durables and Non-Durables, Land.
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