Food security in India: Historical Perspectives and Contemporary Concerns

Kathleen D. Morrison
University of Chicago
Hunger in the land of Gandhi: the shadow on an emerging power

India is a nuclear power - the largest of the world's democracies - and a global superpower of tomorrow. What's often overlooked, however, is the world's malnourished children live there.

The readers of India's popular English-language Times were moved to tears by a recent article about a hunger-stricken three-year-old girl. The girl weighs but 10 kilograms (22 pounds) short for her age. Her father is an electrician, housekeeper, and the family gets by on around 2,500 euros, $160) per month.

This is not a poor family by Indian standards. The government, are those people who live off some 60 cents. Only these people are eligible for a state-funded program that allows them to buy groceries at cheaper prices.

At the same time, however, rents in Mumbai are exorbitantly priced. Living space in the financial metropolis has long been scarce: "When [my daughter] is hungry, she sometimes eats dirt," said desperate father Santosh Ramdas Doiphode.
Source: Oxford health Alliance.

As Grain Piles Up, India’s Poor Still Go Hungry

Sacks of wheat are loaded into trucks in Jagraon, India’s food production has increased almost 50 percent in the last two decades.

By VIKAS BAJAJ
Published: June 7, 2012 | 123 Comments

RANWAN, India — In this north Indian village, workers recently dismantled stacks of burned and mildewed rice while flies swarmed nearby over...
Food Security: Crisis and Response

- **Middle Period famines (1000-1700)**
  - Mobility, open land, storage/charity

- **Colonial Famines (1700-1947)**
  - Public works vs. Providentialism

- **The “Green Revolution” (1960s-)**
  - From grain imports to technological fixes

- **Contemporary contexts (2000-)**
  - Urbanization, globalization, agrarian distress, public distribution system (PDS)
India’s Dal: Increasingly, Not From India
By VIKAS BAJAJ

Lentils are an integral part of the Indian diet.

For many Indians a meal is not complete without a serving of dal, or lentils. In north India, it may be a hearty black dal that could be a meal in itself. In south India, it is likely to be a fiery sambhar, while in Gujarat, it’s often sweet.

But increasingly the dal many Indians eat is, strictly speaking, not Indian. It is
Food Security Crisis

State of health

Government spending on health
10% of GDP

Global Hunger Index score

India has low public health spending and high malnutrition rates

Child malnutrition

Stunting (low height for age)

Underweight (low weight for age)

Wasting (low weight for height)

1. Countries with 2011 score of less than five are not included in the ranking; 2. Children under age 5; 3. Districts and states identified by UNICEF in 2009 as worst in child development; 4. Top-performing districts in Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu

Sources: World Health Organization (spending); International Food Policy Research Institute (index); Naandi Foundation HUNGaMa Survey Report 2011 (malnutrition by district)

The Wall Street Journal

Wall Street Journal, April 9, 2012, By Ashwin Parulkar
Starving in India: A Fight for Life in Bihar

By Ashwin Parukar

Tulsi Manjhi with his daughter, Muniya, in Banwara village in November 2011.

This article is the second in a six-part series. You can view the first installment of the series here.

BANWARA, India – In the fall of 2006, Gita Devi was pregnant with her sixth child when her family fell on hard times. A severe drought made it more difficult than ever to find farm work here in India's northeastern plains.

The family couldn't afford food. It was unable to get a government ration card to buy grains and rice at steep discounts, even though it clearly was poor enough to qualify.
Food is served in a hierarchical fashion in rural extended families: the elder males eating first, women and children later, with the lowest in the hierarchy eating last. It is, therefore, common practice for women, especially the youngest daughters-in-law, the lowest in the hierarchy, to feed the entire family first and then to take whatever may be left over for themselves. Too often there may not be enough.

Caughran 1998:260
The Vijayanagara empire, 14th-17th c. CE

Inland agrarian states like Vijayanagara relied primarily on revenue from agriculture and other taxes.
1876 famine in southern India

• 5-7 million deaths
• Factors:
  – Environmental Conditions
    • Low rainfall; impact influenced by access to irrigation
  – Poverty
    • Exchange entitlements created by inequality
  – Markets
    • Crop export, hoarding, no price controls
Disproportionate impact on landless and poor
- wage earners
- Pastoralists
- Urban dwellers

“Natives obtaining food from the Bunnian’s [merchant/moneylender] shops in a Bazaar”
London Illustrated News, 1876
1876: Responses

- **Mobility**
  - Esp. to princely states

- **Storage/Charity**
  - Late start, too little
    - Public works
    - Kitchens

- **No change in supply, price**
  - Free market ideology
“Famine in India: Natives waiting for relief in Bangalore” (Illustrated London News 1876)
Prime Minister Nehru addressing audience at the opening of the Bhakra-Nangal Dam, 1954
Report sought on India farm suicides

India's Human Rights Commission has sought reports from three states on a spate of suicides by farmers that have been reported by the local media.

Some 800 farmers have reportedly ended their lives in Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala this year.

Most of the suicides have been linked to poverty, debt, a sharp rise in costs and the failure of crops because of pest attacks.

Some 200,000 farmers have committed suicide in India since 1997.

Drought, a fall in crop prices and an increase in the cost of cultivation are cited as reasons.

Every 12 hours, one farmer commits suicide in India

In the 1990s India woke up to a spate of farmers suicides in Maharashtra. Soon newspapers began to report similar cases. The state appointed a number of inquiries to look into the causes of the suicides.

The despair has deepened over the past year with 18 out of every 10,000 suicide graph has been steadily rising.

The numbers are stark and in your face: According to the National Crime Records Bureau, more than 216,000 farmers have killed themselves since 1995. That is, two farmers a day for the past 15 years. The numbers are too many to mention. The number of reported cases make the statistics even more disturbing.

Veteran journalist and The Hindu Rural Affairs editor P. S. Balaiah called it a "catastrophe of our independent history — the suicides of our farmers are taking on the largest recorded rate of suicides in human history."
India's Farming 'Revolution' Heading For Collapse

by DANIEL ZWERDLING

The first of a two-part series

April 13, 2009

Farmers in the village of Chotia Khurd in northern India don't realize it, but they symbolize a growing problem that could become a global crisis.

They gathered on a recent morning in a stone-paved courtyard — a circle of Sikhs with brightly colored turbans and big, bushy beards — to explain why the famed "bread basket" of India is heading toward collapse.

Their comparatively small region, Punjab, grows far more food and rice for India than any other region. But now these farmers are running out of groundwater.

They have to buy three times as much fertilizer as they did 30 years ago to grow the same amount of crops. They blitz their crops with pesticides, but insects have become so resistant that they still often destroy large portions of crops.
In spite of significant growth in the use of fertilizer...
...wheat yields have plateaued
Ration cards are required to access “fair price shops” in the Public Distribution System (PDS)
Grain worth 3 crore, meant for poor, missing from Allahabad godown

NDTV Correspondent | Updated: June 07, 2012 16:31 IST

Allahabad: About 13,000 metric tonnes of foodgrain worth ₹3 crore, meant to be distributed to poor families under the government’s public distribution scheme, has gone missing from a Food Corporation of India (FCI) godown in Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh. The depot manager has reportedly suggested that rats ate the 13,000 metric tonnes of rice and 37 metric tonnes of wheat.

A regional manager of the FCI found the enormous amount of grain missing from the godown during an inspection. A police complaint has been filed against the depot manager who furnished the rodent theory and 10 workers at the godown.

FCI godowns store wheat and rice to be given out to families below the poverty line. The CBI is already investigating a ₹35,000 crore foodgrain scam in UP.

For NDTV Updates.
Food Security Bill a milestone: Congress

New Delhi: Congress on Monday hailed the Food Security Bill approved by the Union Cabinet as a "milestone" like that of the MNREGA and Right to Information Act.

"It is an extremely innovative scheme which is practically efficacious and economically sagacious. It is a milestone. Such a creative initiative has not been thought for decades," party Spokesman Abhishek Singhvi told.

In response to questions about differences in the Cabinet on the measure, he said there were "no doubting Thomas" in the government and raising questions about viability in fact would help in its proper implementation.
National Food Security Bill

An Act to ensure public provisioning of food and related measures to enable assured economic and social access to adequate food, for all persons in the country, at all times, in pursuance of their fundamental right to live with dignity

NFSB final text, 2011
WHEREAS, Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1949) recognizes the right of everyone to adequate food;

AND WHEREAS Article 12, 13 and 14 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women call for the end of discrimination against women in healthcare and recognise the special needs of rural women;

AND WHEREAS Article 21 of the Constitution of India guarantees a fundamental right to life and personal liberty, which necessarily includes the right to life with dignity;

AND WHEREAS, Article 39 (a) of the Constitution of India obliges the State to direct its policy towards ensuring that the citizens, men and women, equally, have the right to an adequate means of livelihood;

AND WHEREAS Article 41 of the Constitution of India obliges the State to make effective provision for securing the right to public assistance in cases of unemployment, old age, sickness and disablement, and in other cases of undeserved want;

AND WHEREAS, Article 47 of the Constitution of India makes it a primary duty of the State to raise the standard of nutrition and the standard of living of its people and to improve public health;

NOW, THEREFORE a set of core entitlements within the universal right to food and nutrition are provided to be enjoyed and progressively expanded until universal access to adequate nutrition is achieved.
I. Agrarian issues

• Address ecological crisis in industrial farming areas
• Support for smallholders, dry farmers
  – Linking producers with urban consumers
• Land rights, intellectual property rights
• Ag. extension in proven agroecological practices
• Reform irrigation infrastructure and administration
• Banking and credit
• Viable crop insurance programs
II. Food Distribution and Access

- Gender rights and women’s education
- Primary education
- Clean water
- Health care and child care
- Corruption
- Improved grain storage facilities
- Links to expanding private sector via ‘food stamp’ style distribution
- Links to new identification cards
- Access to pulses and edible oils
109. For further advancing food and nutritional security, central, state and local governments shall progressively endeavour to -

(a) make efforts to revitalize agriculture and promote agrarian reform, through measures such as securing the interests of small and marginal farmers through remunerative prices, credit, irrigation, crop insurance and technical assistance, and focus on dryland regions;

(b) Prohibit unnecessary and unwarranted diversion of land and water from food production; and promote decentralized food production, procurement and distribution systems;

(c) Pay particular attention to small farmers; and women and youth farmers who constitute the majority of the farming population;

(d) Progressively increase investments in agriculture, research and development, extension, micro and minor irrigation and rural power supply;

(e) diversify commodities available under the Public Distribution System (PDS), to include over time pulses, oil and cooking fuel;

(f) Provide universal access to safe and adequate drinking water and sanitation.

(g) Progressively realize universal health care coverage;

(h) progressively realize universal access to crèche facilities;

(i) Further the commitments enshrined in Article 47 of the Constitution of India that obliges the State to raise the level of nutrition and the standard of living and to improve public health, the Governments shall progressively realize universal access to vitamin A, iodine and iron supplementation.

(j) Provide residential schools for all children in need of care and protection who are deprived of responsible adult protection.

(k) Progressively realize universal nutritional, health and education support to all adolescent girls.

(l) Provide for just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief,

(m) Provide for universal access to adequate pensions for aged, disabled and single women, at rates which are not less than the prevailing statutory minimum wages for unskilled workers.

(n) Provide special nutrition support for persons with stigmatised and debilitating ailments such as HIV/AIDS, leprosy and TB.
Kadebakele village, Karnataka. Part of the EHLTC Research team