

HOW THE POOR STAY POOR

By Mukat and Jyoti Singh

In the ranking of economies worldwide, India features ninth according to the UN, tenth according to the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and CIA World Fact Book and third by purchasing power. This is a remarkable achievement.

It does make one wonder, though, why India still ranks 65th out of 79 countries on the Global Hunger Index and why, by the government's own estimate, almost half of India's children under five are chronically malnourished.

How can there be such a huge discrepancy when the government is spending enormous amounts of money on schemes for the poor?

- The Midday Meal programme for schools provides a free lunch on school days.
- The government has implemented MNREGA which guarantees work for at least 100 days every year to adults willing to do unskilled manual work at the statutory minimum wage.
- It established PDS, the public distribution system, which distributes subsidized food and non-food items to the poor.
- There is an act making education the right of every child aged between 6 and 14.
- The government now allows ordinary citizens access to information from public authorities under the Right to Information Act.
- In U.P., girls from poor families have been encouraged to study further with a one-off gift of Rs 30,000.
- In Assam and U.P., young girls from BPL families who are studying in Classes 8, 9 and 10, are given a free bicycle each.
- At the beginning of 2013, the Chief Minister of U.P. began distributing free laptops to college students.
- In the same state, Rs 1,000 a month is given to the unemployed poor aged between 25 and 40.
- The latest scheme is the Right to Food Act. This promises 5kg of grain per person every month to priority households.

The cost of these schemes runs into trillions of rupees. Yet the poor remain with us. They may survive longer and eat better but they are still poor and none of these schemes enables them to move out of the poverty trap.

Everyone wants to be seen to be helping the poor. Every political party openly declares that we must do something for the poor. The year before an election, the government makes an extra effort and comes up with something like the current Right to Food Act. Clearly it is meant to be a vote winner for a party that is not doing well. Whether or not it succeeds, the Act will not help the poor in any meaningful way.

First of all, there is the simple cost of the scheme. P Chidambaram, Minister of Finance, has promised Rs 10,000 *crore* (a *crore* is Rs 10,000,000) over and above the normal provision for food subsidy, making a total of Rs 90,000 *crore* available for this. However, as Surjit Bhalla makes clear in his article in the Indian Express of July 6th 2013, this is woefully inadequate. The sum needed to implement the Act in full is Rs 314,000 *crore* or 3% of GDP.

So in practical terms, this is not going to work. On moral grounds, it doesn't work either.

Look again at the various government schemes outlined above. With the exception of the Right to Education Act, every one of them is a short-term, relief or welfare programme. None of them involves any training, not one of them includes the beneficiaries in the planning and none of them gives the beneficiaries any ownership of the scheme. Instead, such schemes create a culture of dependency. They do nothing more than fulfil a few basic needs.

They do not empower the poor. They do not help them to stand on their own feet. They make the poor dependent on government hand-outs. Moreover, such schemes are not sustainable. How long can a government keep on handing out large sums of money or goods in this way?

Why, then, has the government never offered a long-term programme to help the poor? Why not a scheme to train them, to enhance

whatever skills they already have and to educate them to be enterprising and risk-taking? Why do none of the schemes ever involve the beneficiaries in the planning? Why do the beneficiaries never have ownership of any kind of scheme?

Could it be that most of those in a position to help the poor do not actually want to improve their situation? Could it be that in a country where poverty is all around you, those who have managed, by whatever means, to lift themselves out of poverty into a comfortable middle-class existence or have become rich and powerful, are afraid of the poor? Yet the poor are powerless. So where does this fear come from?

The man who earns one million rupees a year thinks only about raising that to two million and then doubling that too by any means he can. He lives with the constant worry that he may become poor. All his efforts are intent on making his own position as secure as possible. Frequently, the riches he has earned have come from exploiting the poor – paying low wages, encroaching on small farmers' land, ignoring laws of pollution and ruthlessly flouting rules for the health and safety of employees.

In India, the poor are treated like dirt. If a poor man needs medical care, the doctor deals with him as speedily as possible, rarely giving him all the necessary information on how to take the medication, frequently asking him to pay for medicine he should be getting free. If he wants to get a bank loan, the bank clerks make him wait till last, no matter how long he's been there. If he needs to get paperwork done by a government official, he is usually told to come some other day which means another day's work lost and more money spent on bus fares. No one respects or sympathises with him.

Until this attitude changes, nothing will change for the poor. And changing people's attitude is a long and notoriously difficult process. It

requires them to be fully aware, to think carefully, to examine things in a logical, rational way, to be critical and analytical. But logic, reason and analysis are not skills that the majority of Indians possess.

How could they, when they have been through an education system that is one of the most antiquated in the world, a system rooted in Victorian times, devised for a country thousands of miles from India where it has long since been abandoned in favour of a far more enlightened kind of education.

Mainstream Indian education only requires students to learn a few facts by rote and reproduce them in the exam. There is no requirement to understand any of the things they learn or to know how to implement them. They can forget them the moment the exam is over.

Countless commissions have urged a complete change to this system. But change has not come. Those in charge of the system, those who administer it and those who teach it have no intention of giving up their comfortable lives delivering the kind of system that doesn't require any lesson preparation, is very easy to mark and makes teaching and lecturing the sort of job you could do in your sleep. Change is the last thing they want.

What's more, they have themselves gone through this system and emerged successfully. They cannot think beyond it. Change can only come from those whom the system fails. And there are now some small signs of change. Most political parties can no longer get a majority; ordinary people are beginning to make their voices heard whether it's outrage against rape and murder or anger at rampant corruption.

Slowly, people are realising the power of their voice and the power of their vote. With that, comes the realisation that things can change and more importantly, that they can change them.

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