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Published: October 1, 2011 00:03 IST | Updated: October 1, 2011 01:34 IST

To the hungry, god is bread

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The National Food Security Bill, 2011, designed to make access to food a legal right, is the last chance to convert Gandhiji's vision of a hunger-free India into reality.

What Mahatma Gandhi said of the role of food in a human being's life in a 1946 speech at Noakhali, now in Bangladesh, remains the most powerful expression of the importance of making access to food a basic human right. Gandhiji also wanted that the pathway to ending hunger should involve opportunities for everyone to earn their daily bread, since the process of ending hunger should not lead to the erosion of human dignity.

Unfortunately, this message was forgotten after Independence, and government departments started referring to those being provided any form of social support as "beneficiaries." The "beneficiary" tag is also being applied to the women and men who toil for eight hours under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS). Sixty-five years after Gandhiji's Noakhali speech, India is still home to the largest number of under nourished and malnourished children, women and men in any country. The number of people going to bed partially hungry now is more than the entire population of India in 1947.

Recent articles by P. Sainath in *The Hindu* (September 26 and 27, 2011) brought out vividly the extent of deprivation and destitution prevalent in rural India. Rural deprivation and agrarian distress lead to the growth of urban slums and suffering. The Planning Commission's submission before the Supreme Court on the amount of money needed per day per person in urban and rural India to meet needs in the areas of nutrition, education and health care (Rs.35 a day in urban India, and Rs.26 in rural India) showed how divorced this important body has become from real life.

At least there is a ray of hope in the draft National Food Security Bill, 2011 put on the website of the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution, now under the charge of the humanist, Professor K.V. Thomas. This draft will go through a Select Committee of Parliament. I hope that the final version — designed to make access to food a legal right rather than remaining a token of political patronage — will help erase India's image as the land of the malnourished.

The stated aim of the draft Bill 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, for people to live a life with dignity.” To realise this, we must ensure that every child, woman and man has physical, economic and social (in gender terms) access to a balanced diet (that is, the needed calories and protein), micronutrients (iron, iodine, zinc, Vitamin A, Vitamin B12 and so on), as well as clean drinking water, sanitation and primary health care.

A life cycle approach to food security will imply attention to the nutritional needs of a human being from conception to cremation. The most vulnerable but neglected segment is the first 1,000 days in a child's life — the period from conception to the age of two, when much of the brain development takes place.

Obviously the child during this period can be reached only through the mother. Therefore, the life cycle approach to food security starts with pregnant women. The high incidence of children with low birth weight (less than 2.5 kg) is the result of maternal and foetal undernutrition. Such children suffer from handicaps in later life, including impaired cognitive ability. Denying a child even at birth an opportunity for the full expression of its innate genetic potential for physical and mental development is the cruellest form of inequity. The Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) will have to be redesigned and implemented in two time frames (0-2 and three to six years).

From the legal rights viewpoint, the draft Bill addresses the issue of economic access to food. The other two components of food security — namely, availability of food, which is a function of production, and absorption of food in the body, which is a function of clean drinking water, sanitation and primary health care — cannot easily be made legal entitlements. To make food-for-all a legal right, it is necessary to adopt a Universal Public Distribution System (PDS) with common but differentiated entitlements with reference to the cost and quantity of foodgrain. The draft Bill adopts the nomenclature suggested by the National Advisory Council (NAC) and divides the population into *priority*, that is, those who need adequate social support, and *general*, that is, those who can afford to pay a higher price for foodgrain. The initial prices proposed are Rs.3, 2 and 1 a kg for rice, wheat and millet respectively for the priority group, and 50 per cent of the Minimum Support Price (MSP) for the general group. In a Universal PDS system, both self-selection and well-defined exclusion criteria operated by elected local bodies will help eliminate those who are not in need of social support for their daily bread. In fact, it is the general group that should support financially the provision of highly subsidised food to the economically and socially underprivileged sections. In the case of the well-to-do, the aim of Universal PDS should be to ensure physical access to food.

The widening of the food basket by including a range of nutri-cereals (normally referred to as “coarse cereals”), along with wheat and rice is an important feature of the Food Security Bill. Nutri-cereals such as *bajra*, *ragi*, *jowar*, maize, constitute “health foods,” and their inclusion in the PDS, along with wheat and rice, will encourage their production by farmers. Nutri-cereals are usually cultivated in rainfed areas and are more climate-resilient. Hence, in an era of climate change, they will play an increasingly important role in human nutrition security. During 2010-11, India's farmers produced 86 million tonnes of wheat, 95 million tonnes of rice and 42 million tonnes of nutri-cereals. The production of nutri-cereals, grown in dry farming areas, will go up if procurement and consumption go up. Thus, the addition of these foodgrain will help strengthen foodgrain availability and nutrition security.

The other components of the Bill that do not involve legal commitments, refer to agricultural production, procurement and safe storage of grain, clean drinking water and sanitation. The temptation to provide cash instead of grain to the ‘priority’ group should be avoided. Currency notes can be printed, but grain can be produced only by farmers, who constitute nearly two-thirds of India's population. Giving cash will reduce interest in procurement and safe storage. This in turn will affect production. The “crop holiday” declared by farmers in East Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh is a wake-up call.

A committee set up by the Government of Andhra Pradesh and chaired by Dr. Mohan Kanda, pointed to the following factors behind the decision of a large number of farm families not to grow rice during this *kharif* season. First, the MSP on offer does not cover the cost of production; the MSP fixed by the Government of India was Rs.1,080 a quintal for common varieties, while the cost of production was Rs.1,270. Second, procurement is sluggish since it is largely being done by rice mills. Third, the late release of canal water, non-availability of credit and other essential inputs, and delayed settlement of crop insurance dues, are affecting the morale and level of interest of farm families. Thus, farmers are facing serious economic, ecological and farm management difficulties. The government should consider adopting as a general policy the formula suggested by the National Commission on Farmers (NCF), that MSP should be C2 plus 50 per cent (total cost of production plus 50 per cent).

Finally, the Bill provides for the creation of Food Security Commissions at the State and Central levels. The two essential ingredients of implementing the legal right to food are political will and farmers' skill. Hence, State-level Food Security Commissions should be chaired by farmers with an outstanding record of successful farming. They will then help ensure adequate food supply to feed the PDS. At the national level, the composition proposed by the NCF in its final report submitted in October 2006 will help ensure adequate political will and oversight. The suggestion was to set up a National Food Security and Sovereignty Board at the Central level, with the Prime

Minister chairing it. The other members could be the Union Ministers concerned, political party leaders in Parliament, a few Chief Ministers of grain-surplus and grain-deficit States, and leading farmers and experts.

Unless we develop and introduce methods to ensure effective political and farmer participation in implementing the Food Security Bill, we will not be able to overcome the problems faced by the PDS in some places arising from corruption in the distribution of entitlements.

The National Food Security Bill, 2011, provides the last chance to launch a frontal attack on poverty-induced hunger and to realise Mahatma Gandhi's desire that the God of Bread should be present in every home and hut in India. We should not miss this opportunity.

(M.S. Swaminathan is Chairman, MSSRF, and Member of Parliament, Rajya Sabha.)

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