

Understanding Poverty

Distress in rural areas



Ramachari worked as a carpenter in a village in Chittoor district. He used to make tools and implements for the farmers in the village.

He had no land or cattle. Though Ramachari was not a farmer, his well-being depended on the farming activities of his village.

Till a few years back Ramachari would get around 40 clients, most of them farmers. They paid for his services with paddy. Each gave him 70 kilograms a year. Of the 2800 kg he got this way, he kept what his family needed and sold the rest in the market. He could get around Rs.375 for 70 kg of paddy. This was some years ago. After retaining what his family required, he could make Rs. 8000 in a year this way. With that, he took care of the family.



Trouble started when agriculture operations began to change. The entry of 12 tractors in the village has reduced his work opportunity. Large and medium farmers were hiring tractors and there was less use of bullocks, as you would have read in an earlier chapter. However, that was not all. For many small farmers in the village farming was getting more and more difficult. The canal had dried up, and there was no water for irrigation. To dig bore-wells and buy seed, fertiliser, pesticides farmers had to take loans at high costs. Repayment was difficult, more so when the crops failed. In Ramachari's village, the villagers lost over 30 bullocks in distress sales. That meant less work for Ramachari who made various items linked with their use. No longer was there demand for Ramachari's implements as the farmers were not replacing their tools. The number of clients came down from 40 to 3 or 4 per year.

As the work in the village dwindled, Aruna, Ramachari's wife, started work in a chappal company in Vijaywada. "There was no choice," she says. "I had never been a migrant worker before. But the chances of finding work here were nil." So she migrates for one month at a time, leaving their three children with her husband. More than 250 workers migrated out of the village looking for work leaving the elderly and the young children behind.

While Aruna went to work in the city, the family would remain hungry many times. At times Ramchari had to borrow from the neighbours even to buy some broken rice. Ramachari would often fall ill and keep poor health. He was not able to work to the same capacity as before.

- In what way, was Ramachari's livelihood related to agriculture in the village?
- Do you think the hardships that the family faces is because of:
 - (a) Ramachari's lack of awareness and effort OR
 - b) the livelihood situation in the village.
- What do you think can be done such that Ramachari and his family get two square meals a day?
- How would you describe the exchange between Ramachari and the farmers in the village?
- How many kilograms of paddy would Ramachari retain for the family in normal years?
- Can we consider Rs. 8000 a year sufficient to cover the family's expenses (other than foodgrains)?

Chandraiah is a cart-puller. His family lives in the village while he works in the city market and lives in the city slums. At times he earns Rs.100 and on some days he doesn't earn more than Rs.40, depending on the number of trips he makes with his cart. During the day, Chandraiah eats from one of the carts in

the market selling **roti and dal**. Since he wants to save money to send to his family, he usually eats less than what would be adequate for the heavy manual work that he does. Towards the evening he is very tired. All the cart-pullers who stay in the slums pool in money and take turns to cook the evening meal. Living and working for twenty years in this manner, without adequate nutrition, has sapped Chandraiah's energy and he looks much older than his age.

- Discuss what is common to Chandraiah's and Ramachari's lives.



Fig 17.1: Discuss the different living standards in the above urban picture

Poverty as Chronic Hunger

Situation of chronic hunger is widespread. Numerous people, like Ramachari and Chandraiah, across Indian villages and cities cannot afford enough food every day to be healthy and lead an active life. They may not always appear to be in the desperate situation that we find with homeless or old people living on the streets. These people may look normal to us but they experience hunger and fatigue. They do not get sufficient food to eat. They are eating less than what they should. If this situation continues for a long time it is called chronic or persistent hunger. They are usually tired, feel weak and often fall ill.

We need energy to move muscles, to walk, talk and do our routine work. We get this energy from the food that we eat. This energy is measured in kilocalories (kcal). For example one tea spoon of sugar gives us 40 kcal, one tea spoon of oil gives us 90 kcal. If you look at any packaged food it usually indicates the total calories that one would get from it.

The national calorie standard was established as 2,400 and 2,100 kcal per day for rural and urban areas. On an average a person requires food that would provide 2100 kcal per day as a minimum energy intake to stay healthy. In rural areas, where manual work is more intense, the calorie intake requirement is higher at 2400 kcal per day.

Can you imagine that 80 percent of people in rural areas in India consume food that is way below the calorie standard? That is 4 out of 5 persons have food that is deficient in calories. Deficiency in

calories is not limited to people in the villages alone. In the urban areas too, 3 out of every 5 persons have food that is deficient in calories.

What is even more disturbing is that over the years, the calorie consumption of the poorest has been declining. When compared to the 1980s, while our country as a whole seems to have apparently become more prosperous and we have many more goods and services than were available earlier. But the poorest hunger has increased. They actually consume less calories today than say 25 years back!

- What is the average calorie intake of persons in the top quarter in the country
- By what percentage does the calorie intake of persons in the bottom quarter fall short of the daily calorie standard?
- Why do you think the calorie intake of the people are so low?

Hunger is not just painful to bear, it is also destructive. Chronic hunger and calorie deficiency is related to under-nourishment. People who are chronically hungry do not have access to sufficient amounts of safe and nutritious food and therefore are undernourished. Their undernourishment makes it hard to study, work or otherwise perform physical activities. Undernourished children do not grow as quickly as healthy children. Mentally, they may develop more slowly. Constant hunger weakens the immune system and makes them more vulnerable to diseases and infections. Mothers living with constant hunger often give birth to underweight and weak babies.

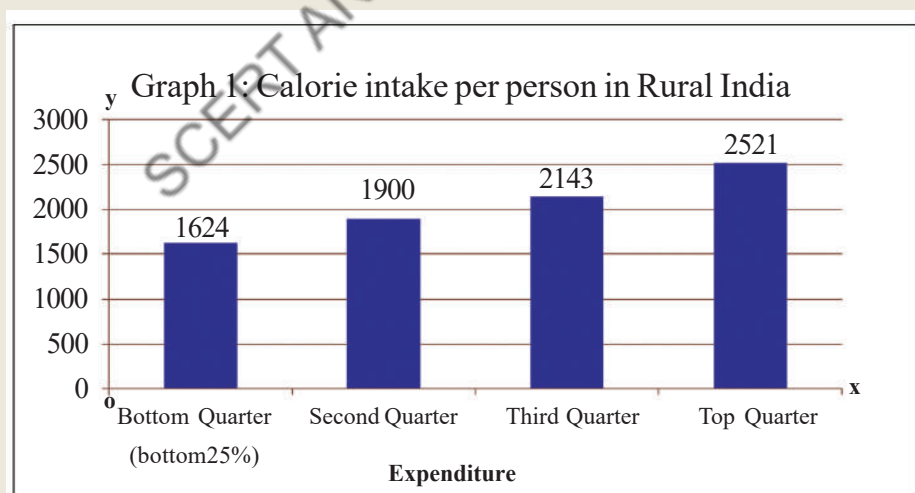
Food Inequality

Like scientists do experiments in the laboratories and generate data, for social scientists surveys are a valuable source of data and constitute evidence for analysis. National Sample Survey is one such survey conducted by the government of India after every four or five years to know about the economic and social conditions of the people. Surveyors interview a very large number of households across the country and compile this information on various items. This data is then used by researchers to understand what is happening to, say, employment, spending by people, schooling, health, access to drinking water, etc. This data is particularly useful to know whether the government policies are moving in the right direction.



Graph 1 on calorie intake was drawn using information collected during National Sample Survey done in 2004. Researchers tried to look at the calorie intake per person and found that the calorie intake differs widely across the poor and the rich. People with very low income can spend very little (the poorest) consume 1624 kcal on average. As the incomes and spending increases, the calorie intake rises. The calorie intake of the poorest continues to be much less than the calorie intake of the top quarter of the population, despite the poor needing more calories because of harder manual work.

For a very large percentage of people, their daily food intake doesn't meet the calorie requirement. All the people whose intake falls below the calorie standard can be considered as poor.



Note: Expenditure here means spending on household items like food, clothing, footwear, education, medical care, fuel and lighting, house rent etc. In 2004, every person in the bottom quarter could spend less than Rs. 340 per month per person, i.e. even less than Rs. 12 a day on these essential items of living! Those in the second quarter were spending a little more and so on. As one goes further on the x-axis, the spending rises.

Activity

- One way to find out if adults are undernourished is to calculate what Nutrition Scientists call Body Mass Index (BMI). This is easy to calculate. Take the weight of the person in kgs. Then take the height in metres. Divide the weight by the square of the height. If this figure is less than 18.5 then the person would be considered undernourished. However, if this BMI is more than 25, then a person is overweight. Do remember that this criterion is not applicable to growing children.

Let each student in the class find out the weight and height of three adult persons of different economic backgrounds like office workers, servants, business person etc. Collect the data from all the students and



Fig 17.2: Measuring the height

make a combined table. Calculate their BMI.

- Do you find any relationship between economic background of person and his/her nutritional status?

Why Poverty? How can it be eliminated?

The most important contributor to poverty, as you would have guessed by now, is the **lack of regular employment**.

In the absence of employment opportunities, people lack the purchasing power (income) to fulfil their basic needs. Chronic hunger is one of the fallouts of this lack of minimum purchasing power.

Agriculture - Source of Livelihood

More than 50 percent of people in India still depend upon agricultural activities for their livelihood. Most of these are small farmers and agricultural labourers. Besides there are persons whose occupations are allied to agriculture like the carpenter Ramachari. Success of such non-farm workers like potters, leather workers, small-processing units in the village also depends on the state of agriculture. We saw how Ramachari and his family suffered when agriculture stagnated in the village. There was no demand for tools and

implements that Ramachari could make. Ramachari had little work and hardly any income. Like other poor households, the family possessed no land or cattle. The village in that year could provide no opportunities for work as agricultural labourer in the fields. Neither was there any non-farm work.

Since the well-being and livelihood of so many people are dependent on agriculture, it is very important that agriculture grows well. When agriculture prospers, it would normally generate employment and income for people in the rural areas. Also, when agriculture production is abundant, prices of food items are likely to be more affordable for people than it would otherwise be.

At present, there are a variety of problems plaguing agriculture. You have read in the Chapter on Agriculture in Our Times in Class VI, how the small farmers suffer as a result of lack of water for irrigation, loans at reasonable interest rates, reliable seeds and fertilisers for cropping. (You might like to re-read and recall the case-studies of small farmers Ravi and Ramu in Venkatapuram.) The high costs of inputs, low yields and frequent crop failure have led to acute farmer distress. Most small farmers are also forced to work as agricultural labourers in order to make ends meet. In fact, four out of five farmers in Andhra Pradesh are like Ravi and Ramu.

Here are a few steps that the government must undertake to support agricultural growth and those dependent on agriculture. Can you write a few lines on

each? Why is it important? You could give examples from your own context.

1. Timely provision of seed, fertiliser, pesticides by the government such that the farmer does not have to depend on middlemen/ traders. The government must ensure that these products are of standard quality and reasonably priced.
2. Small irrigation projects
3. Timely availability of bank loans at reasonable interest rate
4. Outlets or marketing the crops at a fair price for producers
5. Development of roads, transport systems in the countryside
6. Assistance to farmers in case of crop failure

Other Livelihood Options

In Andhra Pradesh, nearly two-fifths of all rural families are mainly agricultural labourers. These families are mostly landless and others cultivate very little land. The opportunities for work are very limited. The number of days of agricultural labourers can manage to get in a normal year varies from 120 to 180 days. There are long stretches of lean season when practically no work is available on the fields.

In years when the crops fail due to drought, floods, pest attack or any other calamity, the number of days of agricultural work are further reduced. These are the times when large-scale migrations happen and acute distress and hunger strikes the countryside. What can be done to ensure that livelihoods are protected in such circumstances?

The Right to Work states that everyone should be given the opportunity to work for a basic living. The Indian Constitution

refers to the right to work under the “directive principles of state policy”. Article 41 stresses that “the state, shall

MNREGA



Baleshwar Mahto, a resident of Bihar’s Araria district goes to Punjab every year in search of work to sustain his family. He had planned to go there this June as well. However, he got MNREGA employment in his own village and so he decided to stay back.

A large number of people from Araria are forced to look for work in Punjab, Delhi and Gujarat as employment is hard to find locally. What is available is very poorly paid, with wages varying from Rs.40 to Rs.60 a day during the harvest season otherwise., even less (Rs.25 to Rs.50 a day). Baleshwar takes up such employment only when he is forced to stay back in his village, for instance, owing to illness in the family.

However, in the cities, the migrant workers live in deplorable conditions, with no access to basic facilities such as shelter, sanitation or even safe drinking water. Women and children who are left behind face insecurity, and family relations often suffer.

MNREGA is a triple bonus for Baleshwar: apart from providing local employment, it enables him to combine this work with tending his own fields and spending more time with his family.

MNREGA lays down that any adult member willing to do unskilled manual work and who is looking for work must be given work by the government. A rural household can demand at least one hundred days of employment in a year for which they would be paid not below the minimum wages.

- ❖ *water conservation and water harvesting*
- ❖ *drought proofing (including afforestation and tree plantation)*
- ❖ *provisions of irrigation facility to land owned by households belonging to the SCs and STs*
- ❖ *renovation of traditional water bodies including desilting of tanks*
- With the help of your teacher, find out what the above works (given in italics) mean.
- Plan a visit to one of the sites in your village/ town where you can see public works in progress. Record your conversations.
- Why do you think the MNREGA places priority on provision of irrigation facility to land owned by households belonging to the SCs and STs?
- Why MNREGA is treated as a major breakthrough towards protection of rural livelihoods?

within the limits of its economic capacity and development, make effective provision for securing right to work...” However, people have never being able to exercise these rights. The government when it liked would start public works and workers would be employed. But people generally could not demand work when they required or near to their place of stay.

After years of struggle by people’s groups the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 (MNREGA) was passed. It was a major breakthrough towards protection of livelihoods in rural areas.

A Social Audit Report

The findings of the social audit team in Rachanapalle, Anantpur in Feb. 2009 shows:

- payments were made correctly,
- the field assistant performed his function well,
- there were no contractors at the worksite,
- but the work quality is poor.

Besides, it found that :

Plantation and ploughing work has been done only in 5.60 acres, whereas the measurement sheet of this work shows that ploughing and plantation work has been done in 15 acres. So money has been paid for excess of 9.04 acres. Old Technical Assistant Rammohan is responsible for this issue.

As per records Ramadevi of Sindiket Nagar had to be paid Rs.400 for 6 days regarding Pebble Bunding work . But she has not been paid the amount.

You can access the information of social audit for your village at the website for The Society for Social Audit, Accountability and Transparency, Department of Rural development, Government of Andhra Pradesh. <http://125.17.121.162/SocialAudit/Login.jsp>

Access to Affordable Food

“From his granary the king should set apart one half for the people in the countryside in times of distress, and use the other half. And he should replace old stock for new.”

Arthashastra (2.15.22-23)

by Kautilya, 4th Century B.C.

Alongside employment, the government has to ensure that everyone has access to affordable food. Employment and income cannot do much, if the prices of essential items are very high. The major way in which the government tries to ensure that the essential items are affordable is to sell foodgrains through the ration shops at a “fair price”. The government buys foodgrains from farmers and supplies these to the ration shops. Ration shops keep stocks of foodgrains (and other essential items like sugar, pulses, kerosene oil for cooking) and these items are then sold to the people. Prices at the ration shops are meant to be lower than the prices in the market.

The system of ration shops distributing foodgrains and other essential items is known as the **Public Distribution System** (or **PDS** in short). PDS has existed in India right from the time of independence and has played a crucial role in reaching food



Social Audit in Andhra Pradesh



An often repeated complaint of government employment programmes has been about corruption. The benefits of the schemes, it is said, go to those who wield power and the contractors, whereas the poor receive much less than what is officially claimed. To reduce corruption, MNREGA introduced compulsory social audits.

Social audit is a process by which the community verifies (audits) the program and its implementation. It tries to find out whether the benefits of the project/activities reach the people for whom it is meant. The Andhra Pradesh experience in this regard has been particularly noteworthy. The government of AP has taken an active role in supporting this initiative from civil society.



1. A few energetic literate youth who usually belong to the families of MNREGA workers are trained in social audit processes.



2. These youth form teams go from door-to-door to verify muster rolls, check out worksites, record written statements of workers and conduct a series of meetings in each village.



3. Next, a massive public meeting is organized at the mandal headquarters attended by people from every village, their elected representatives, the media, the MNREGA functionaries concerned, and senior government officers.



4. At this meeting, village-wise social audit findings are read out, workers testify and the officials concerned respond to the issues raised by giving an explanation about their actions under complaint.



5. Officials are also required to specify the nature of remedial action they will take and the time limit.
6. In the follow-up, social audit teams go back to their villages every 15 days after the mandal public meeting to ensure that the decisions taken are actually enforced.

Large amounts of misappropriated funds have been recovered through social audits in AP. On many occasions, errant officials have “voluntarily” returned money to workers at the mandal public meeting itself. Action has been initiated against corrupt officials. In the process the awareness about the detailed provisions of MNREGA rose dramatically among labour.

to everyone both in the rural and urban areas. There were ofcourse problems of functioning. At places, the ration shops would not open regularly or on time. The foodgrain stocks would be adulterated with the intention that no one buys. Ration shop owners would be found selling foodgrains to other shops rather than to the public. Many people including the poor would not receive ration. Performance of ration shops was not so good as expected in the poorest states and the poorest regions of India.

- Do you think that cash transfer scheme is an alternative to the PDS?

The problems of PDS require better implementation. Since PDS was working well in the Southern states of Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, it would certainly be possible to improve, if only everyone would try.

However, the Indian government had other plans. Around the year 1997, it decided that ration shops should cater mainly to the poor. From here on, the poor would be served by the ration shops, while the rest would buy foodgrains mainly from the market at a higher price.

To implement this new policy on the PDS, the government needed to know who the poor are. Thus, the panchayats in the villages were asked to conduct surveys called BPL (Below Poverty Line) surveys. These surveys take into account the family's income, means of livelihood, number of meals per day, clothing, housing, migration, debt etc. to decide whether the household is a poor household (BPL household).

Based on the survey results, three types of cards were issued.

The poorest families are issued Antyodaya cards. Next, whose situations are slightly better but still can be considered poor are issued BPL (Below Poverty Line) cards. The remaining families are issued APL (Above Poverty Line) cards.

Quantities and prices of ration given to each cardholder are different. For example, the

Antyodaya cardholders are entitled to get 35 kgs of foodgrains (rice and wheat) per month per family. The BPL cardholders in Andhra Pradesh can receive 4 kgs of foodgrains per head, not exceeding 20 kgs per family. The Annapurna Scheme card holders who are the poorest of the poor (Indigent senior citizens) get 10 kgs of rice free of cost.



- Do you think the poor will be served better now with new policy? Provide reasons in favour of your answer.
- Could you suggest some more ways of improving the PDS?

The Struggle towards “The Right to Life”

The new policy on PDS has been at the center of much debate. We know that about 4 out of 5 people in the rural areas consume less than the minimum required calories. And yet, not even 3 out of 10 families in the rural areas in India possessed BPL and Antyodaya cards, as per the National Sample Survey of 2004. Thus, a large number of people who earlier benefited from the PDS were no longer covered by it. Many families of landless labourers did



Fig 17.3: Children taking mid day meal in school

not have BPL cards. Whereas, there were some reports of well-off families with BPL cards.

There are other contradictions too in the new PDS (Public Distribution System) Policy. The government of India often has huge piles of food stocks (i.e. foodgrains that it bought from farmers). There have been times when foodgrains rot in godowns and are eaten by rats. Since the ration shops sell foodgrains at a fair price only to BPL, Antyodaya and Annapurna card holders, there are unsold stocks at the ration shop too. And yet, there is a feeling that we are not able to provide food to all.

This is a clear violation of the fundamental right - the Right to Life enshrined in Article 21 of the Indian Constitution. People have asked: how can life be possible without food? Why can't the government take responsibility? Why

can't the government supply foodgrains for free rather than have it rot? Is this a just situation? Over a period of time, a public campaign for Right to Food has built up. People have taken legal action. Civil rights groups have filed petitions in the Supreme Court against the government for violation of the Right to Life, of which the Right to Food is a part. They have sought that foodgrains at a fair price should be available for all families. Each family should be entitled to more foodgrains than they are getting presently.

Supreme Court rulings and continuous pressures from ordinary people have begun to make small but crucial differences in the workings of a number of programmes, including the PDS. But still much more needs to change.

- Ration shops are also called fair price shops. Can you guess why?

In this chapter, we have read about the Right to Work and Right to Food in the context of widespread persistence of hunger in India. Both the Right to Work and Right to Food are absolutely essential to escape from hunger and poverty. Escape from poverty and a life of dignity, however, means much more. It includes health and education, shelter and clothing, water and sanitation, pollution free air, energy and infrastructure, security, non-discrimination, democratic participation, etc. These economic and social rights are again part of the Right to Life. It is this expanded understanding that the society has to work towards.

Key words

1. Undernourishment
2. Agricultural growth
3. Directive principles
4. Public works
5. Social audit
6. Below Poverty Line
7. Public Distribution System



Improve your learning

1. Which of the following statement/ statements in the context of poverty as chronic hunger is true: AS₁
 - a. having food only once a day
 - b. having food below the required calorie
 - c. person driving the harvester and person ploughing the field require same calorie of food
 - d. person ploughing the field requires more calorie than shop owner
 - e. hunger also affects the persons immune system
2. Identify the major reasons for poverty described in the chapter. AS₁
3. What have been the major features in programmes like MNREGA and PDS? Which aspects of poverty do they try to address. Why are ration shops necessary? AS₄
4. Why are people without employment also often without assets, such as land, cattle, shops etc.? AS₁
5. Read the first two paragraphs under the title “The Struggle towards ‘The Right to Life’” of page 201 and 202 and comment on them. AS₂
6. Write a letter to your District Collector on conduction of P.D.S. programme in your village? AS₆

Project:

Visit the ration shop in your neighbourhood and look for the following:

- When does the ration shop open?
- What are the items sold at the ration shop?
- Do you find the system of different card-holders?
- Can you compare the prices of rice and sugar from the ration shop (for families below poverty line) with the prices at any other grocery store? [Important: Ask for the ordinary variety rates at the grocery shop.]