

Hungry India

TALKING 'GROWTH' IS JUST fashionable, if not glamorous these days. Everybody is interested in GDP data, not hunger index. India's ranking in the 2009 Global Hunger Index—a shameful 65th from among 88 hungry countries, much below sub-Saharan Africa, speaks volumes about this emerging economic power. For 200 million Indians who are hungry as per latest estimates by the International Food Policy Research Institute this place is a living hell on earth. But the Institute's figures are a gross underestimation as not very long ago India's National Commission on Enterprises in Unorganised Sector computed that 837 million Indians spend a paltry Rs 20 (less than 50 cents) a day. And Rs 20 a day cannot buy a person two square meals! In other words, about 77 percent of the country's population is living on the edge, somehow managing to survive. And the growth song does hardly make any sense to them. The net economic worth of 36 billionaires constitutes one-third of India's GDP, conveniently hiding the poverty and squalor in which 837 million Indians live.

Hungry India is virtually tearing the growth myth apart, albeit corporate India and their political managers are cheering all the time about the economy that is growing at an average of 7 to 8 percent. But hunger too is on the rise.

The correlation between hunger and economic growth is robustly positive—the greater the economic growth, the greater the number of people going to bed hungry. That economic growth pulls the poor out of poverty and hunger is a propaganda the ruling elites indulge in to mislead the people. In reality the reverse is true.

India is fast sinking into a quagmire of deprivation and despair. As per the report (2006-07) of the National Sample Survey Organisation, cereal consumption has steadily declined over the years, with no corresponding increase in the intake of more nutritious eggs, vegetables, fruits and milk. To put it mildly hunger is now more widespread and better entrenched than ever. The decline in cereal consumption follows a steady pattern, more or less, in both rural and urban areas; of course it is much faster in rural areas. The recent spurt in prices or what they philosophically call food inflation made things harder for the poor. And it is quite natural that cereal consumption will fall further to make the situation difficult for the marginalised.

Ignoring the premise that economic growth does not automatically translate into human development, successive governments have been repeatedly asserting that opening up markets is the key to attracting foreign investments and accelerating growth. But this growth is directly proportional to hunger. Economic growth is no indicator of human development. The hungry need food now, not the 7-8 percent growth miracle.□□□