

Why India is Losing Its War on Hunger

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India is confronted with an agrarian crisis and mass hunger, despite producing enough food to feed itself. This paper argues that the country needs urgent action to protect the universal right to food, prioritize land reforms, and sustainably revive agrarian productivity.

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Introduction

India is home to a quarter of the world's hungry people.¹ Since the Green Revolution² the country has produced enough to feed itself,³ but it has not yet been able to wipe out mass hunger, which haunts the landscape of the countryside and lurks in the narrow alleys of urban slums. Currently, 40 per cent of the population is malnourished – a decrease of only 10 per cent over the past three decades.⁴

Stellar economic growth has not proved to be the promised silver bullet either. Following the wave of neoliberal economic reforms in 1991 India's GDP has doubled,⁵ but despite this 53 million more people now go to bed hungry every night.⁶ The media also frequently chronicle heart-rending accounts of deaths due purely to starvation.⁷

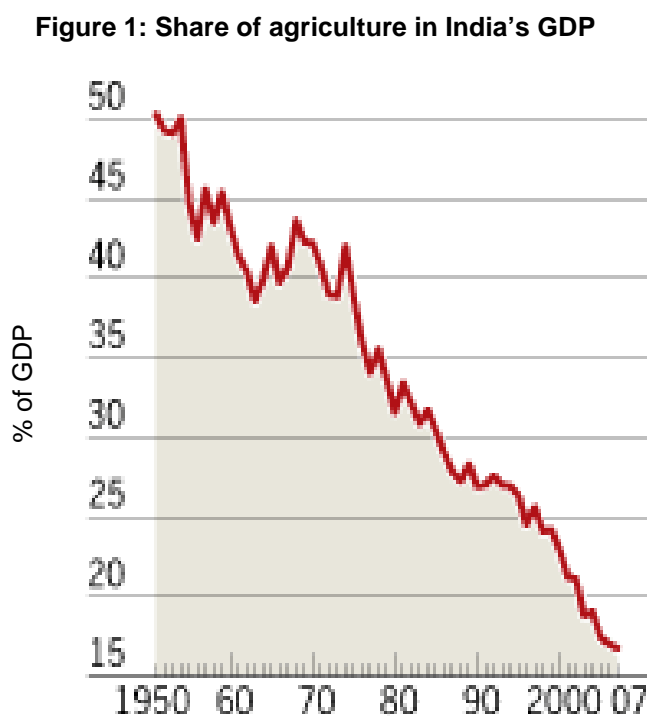
To make matters worse, food prices have recently soared.⁸ Poor families, who spend more than 60 per cent of their incomes on food,⁹ are increasingly struggling to stretch their meagre household budgets.

Unfortunately, small farmers have not benefited from high retail prices either, as they usually receive far less for their produce.¹⁰ In fact in the past 15 years, in an unprecedented wave, a quarter of a million farmers crippled by debt have chosen to commit suicide.¹¹

Clearly, the country is in the midst of both an agrarian crisis and a nutrition crisis.

Lopsided development

The root cause of this dual-edged tragedy is India's lopsided development. Historically, for generations socio-economic advancement has bypassed the majority of the population. Even in the recent surge towards modernity, three systemic trends of impoverishment are evident: jobless growth, diminishing agrarian returns, and social exclusion.



Source: World Development Indicators
<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NV.AGR.TOTL.ZS/country>

Jobless growth¹²

Since the 1980s, average family incomes have increased rapidly.¹³ However, the educated elite have cornered most of these gains. Many of them work in the service sector, which includes Bangalore's celebrated call centres. But though this booming sector as a whole produces half of the country's GDP, it employs only one-quarter of the workforce.

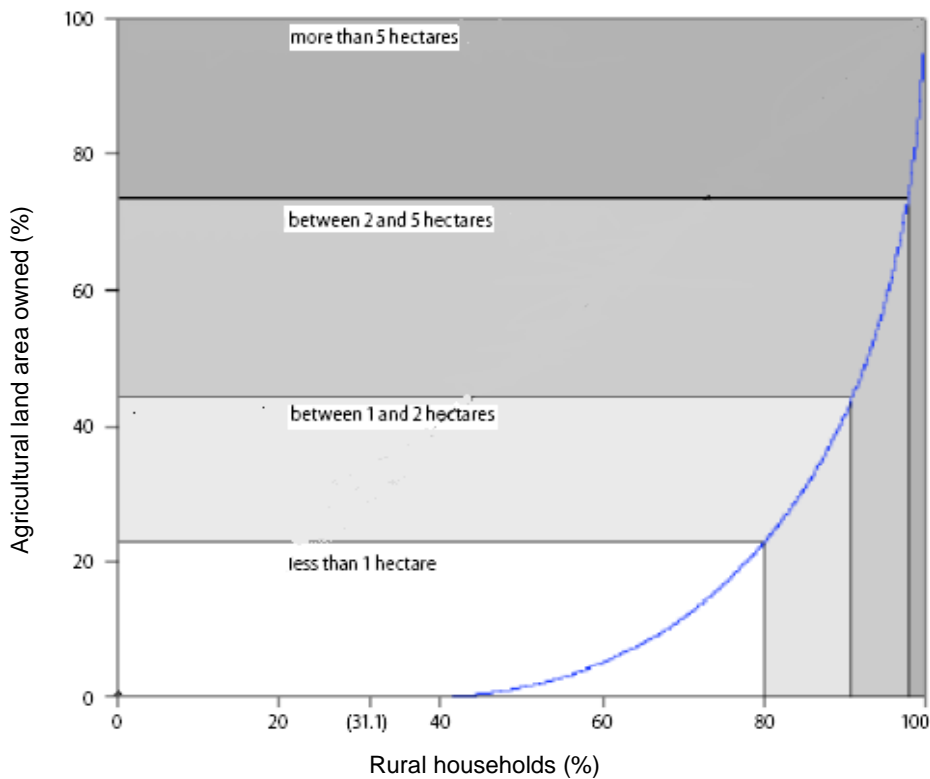
Indian factories have also failed to create sufficient low-skilled, labour-intensive jobs,¹⁴ in a country where one-third of the population is illiterate.¹⁵ So, with few alternatives in sight, more than half of the country's working-age adults toil in the fields. However, they produce only one-fifth of India's GDP and hunger often stalks rural homes.¹⁶

Agrarian returns are diminishing

Two-thirds of India's poor people live in this feudal rural landscape.¹⁷ Here, access to land is all important. But even after decades of failed land reforms, 41 per cent of rural households are effectively landless.¹⁸ Furthermore, three-quarters of farm owners possess only subsistence plots of less than one hectare (Figure 2), from which they are barely able to eke out a living.

Worse still, since the 1990s, economic policies have sidelined agriculture, which has slipped into a deep crisis.¹⁹ While the government's agrarian investments have shrunk, the number of indebted smallholder farmers has doubled.²⁰ In the past five years, per capita food production has also declined²¹ and the yields for rice have been virtually flat.²² Even in the lush wheat fields of the northern state of Punjab, farmers complain that the increases in productivity experienced after the Green Revolution in the 1970s are a distant memory.²³

Figure 2: Distribution of agricultural land area among rural households



Source: Rawal (2008) 'Ownership Holdings of Land in Rural India: Putting the Record Straight', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 8 March 2008, p. 43-47

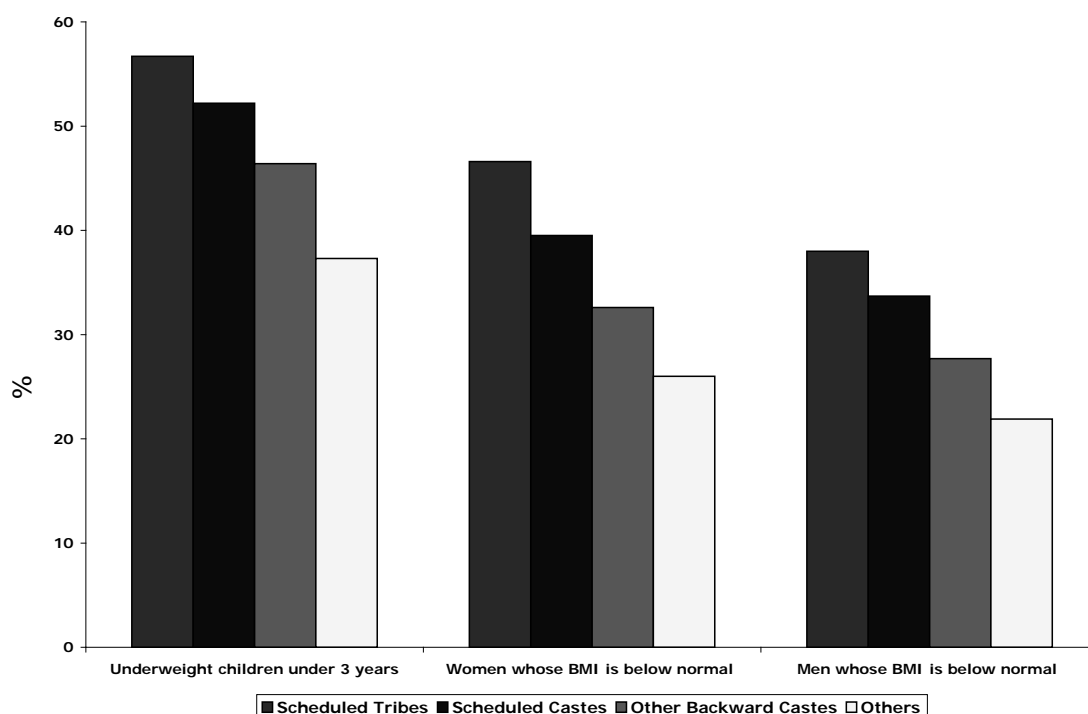
With these odds stacked against them, 40 per cent of farmers across India admitted in a 2005 survey that, if given a choice, they would prefer to quit farming.²⁴

Social exclusion

Caste, which has regimented occupational choices in India for generations, also plays a role in aggravating poverty and hunger (Figure 3). For example, the majority of *dalits* (i.e. scheduled castes²⁵) remain landless.

For decades too, large dams, steel mills, and other ‘temples of modern India’²⁶ have displaced millions of indigenous tribal *adivasis* (scheduled tribes²⁷), who are among the most impoverished of India’s people, from their traditional homes.²⁸ Civil society was able recently to sustain pressure to oust the British mining conglomerate Vedanta from the tribal habitat of the bauxite-rich Niyamgiri hills,²⁹ but this victory was an exception to the wider trend of industrial acquisition.³⁰

Figure 3: Malnutrition levels based on caste and tribe



Source: Fred Arnold, Sulabha Parasuraman, P. Arokiasamy, and Monica Kothari (2009) ‘Nutrition in India. National Family Health Survey (NFHS-3), India, 2005–06’, Mumbai: International Institute for Population Sciences; ICF Macro: Calverton, Maryland, USA. Men and women refer to (married) adults in the 15–49 age groups.

The traditional family structure also breeds subtle forms of social exclusion. Women often eat last and least. Two-thirds of girls are married as teenagers:³¹ in fact, the vicious inter-generational cycle of malnutrition often starts with an anaemic, under-age, illiterate, and impoverished mother. Thirty per cent of Indian children are born underweight – one of the highest proportions in the world.³²

Seeds of change

In the midst of this overwhelming national hunger crisis, many progressive strands of change have emerged, from both Indian civil and political society.

Social movements

Incensed by the injustice of widespread deaths from starvation despite mountains of excess food-grains in state granaries,³³ in 2001 influential activists launched the Right to Food Campaign.³⁴ Since then they have waged a decade-long battle to address the hunger crisis, using multiple democratic advocacy tools. For example, public interest litigation in the Supreme Court has forced the government to deliver freshly cooked school meals to 130 million children every day.

Other civil society initiatives include media coverage of farmer suicides,³⁵ which helped push the central government to implement a one-off farm debt waiver in 2008–09.³⁶

Political populism

The creation in 2004 of the National Advisory Council, which in 2010 began a second term, has also boosted momentum for civil society to directly influence social policies. This institution, chaired by the ruling Congress Party president Sonia Gandhi, has provided the necessary political will to push through groundbreaking legislative changes.

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) (2005), for example, drafted in the first term of the NAC and in 2009–10 provided work to 54 million rural households. It is also believed to have been a significant vote-catcher in the re-election of the Congress Party to power in the 2009 elections, in the world's largest democracy.

The National Food Security Bill (NFSB), which the NAC in its second term is currently drafting, aims to create more enduring legal entitlements to prevent hunger.³⁷ However, many states in the federal structure are already many steps ahead. Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh have long experimented with populist electoral promises of cheap food-grains and other subsidies.

Diluted nutrition

Prolonged tugs-of-war between various democratic power centres have eroded India's fight against hunger. The 2010 Supreme Court censure³⁸ concerning rotting food-grains in overflowing granaries even led the Prime Minister to question the very role of judicial activism in policy formulation.³⁹

Power centres

At the centre, the diarchy⁴⁰ within the ruling Congress Party has further diluted a number of visionary anti-hunger initiatives. For example, the NAC's draft NFSB⁴¹, based on negotiations with the government, has missed an historic opportunity to do away with the ineffective practice of targeting⁴² poor households to deliver subsidised food-grain.⁴³

Although the PM's Council on Nutrition has also finally met after more than two years, its plans⁴⁴ to revamp the 35-year-old Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) across ministries also appear to be piecemeal.⁴⁵

As a result of this prolonged apathy, a number of social protection interventions remain woefully underfunded by the centre and inefficiently implemented by most states, and are thus incapable of making any meaningful dent on hunger. The NREGA, for example,

even after five years provides households with only half of the 100 days of work guaranteed each year.⁴⁶

To add to this mismanagement, economists and bureaucrats in key central ministries, including the influential Planning Commission, remain in favour of fiscal prudence and further shrinking of the role of the state. Cash transfers are the latest buzzword and the Finance Minister has already set in motion processes to use these to replace subsidised farmers' fertilisers and household cooking fuel.⁴⁷

Governance deficit

Endemic corruption has also permeated all levels of governance. It is estimated that 30–70 per cent of the subsidised food-grains distributed through half a million fair-price ration shops are routinely diverted to the black market.⁴⁸

The Right to Information (RTI Act) (2005), which revolutionised social audits as a tool for challenging corruption, has also struggled to overcome stiff opposition from the entrenched politician–bureaucrat–contractor nexus.

Neither does the Finance Minister's recent budget speech for 2011–12 offer any hope for reviving agriculture.⁴⁹ In fact, experts argue that it sounds the death knell for agricultural extension services.⁵⁰ Instead, the emphasis is on corporate tax waivers, even though Indian companies are blatantly indulging in land grabs in Africa.⁵¹ The proposed entry of multinational retail supermarket giants to the Indian market could be the final nail in the coffin for small farmers and retailers.⁵²

Future shock

Every year, 18 million people are added to India's population, more than the entire population of Chile.⁵³ In the next 20 years, with the structural shift towards urbanisation, 290 million more Indians will live in cities and towns.⁵⁴ Not only will they have to be fed from the rural countryside, but the pressures on water and land are expected to multiply.

However, already Indian agriculture can barely cope. Vast expanses of Indian farmland are un-irrigated and are at the mercy of increasingly erratic annual rains. Over-exploitation of groundwater is already a lived reality in many parts of India. Over-use of fertilisers on large farms⁵⁵ and depletion of natural resources also threaten agrarian productivity. In ecological terms, only one-third of Indian farmland remains in good health.⁵⁶

Studies predict that India will continue to be able to produce enough cereals to keep pace with the projected increase in population till 2020, but this assumes a healthy increase in productivity.⁵⁷ But that apart, Indian agriculture will continue to struggle to keep pace with changing diets. The vagaries of climate change, especially in drought-prone areas, will further add to this vulnerability.

Call to action

In the past decade, India has made some headway in the battle against inter-generational hunger. But the opportunity to redistribute the gains of sustained economic growth has been lost. The main culprit is entrenched inequality in the modes of production and distribution of food.

India's democracy has proved to be both its strength and its weakness. While the progressive Right to Food campaign has had sporadic successes, a decade after its formation the tragedy of excess food grains rotting in granaries has been repeated.⁵⁸

At this current sluggish pace of change, India will halve hunger only by 2083 – nearly 70 years after the MDG deadline.⁵⁹ To accelerate momentum, effective implementation of the NFSB will be key. However, a real game changer would need a renewed emphasis on land reform⁶⁰ and a sustainable revival of agrarian productivity.

Notes

- ¹ <http://www.fao.org/economic/ess/ess-fs/ess-fadata/en/> (last accessed 28 March 2011).
- ² The introduction of high-yielding varieties of seeds after 1965 and the increased use of fertilisers and irrigation is known as the Green Revolution. Food-grain yields increased dramatically between 1965 and 1980. By the 1980s, almost 75 per cent of the total crop area under wheat and 45 per cent under rice was sown with high-yielding varieties.
- ³ In 1995 India entered the international market as a food exporter largely self-sufficient in food-grain production – though it is the world's top importer of edible oils. Whenever India enters the world market as a buyer, even small purchases cause international prices to soar. For example, a shortage of sugar in India in 2009 helped push New York raw sugar futures to a 29-year peak. Himangshu Watts (2010) 'Population, incomes tilt India towards food imports', Reuters, 3 June 2010.
- ⁴ In the 1970s, about half the Indian population had a body mass index (BMI) of less than 18.5 (which is the lower end of 'normal' nutritional status). By 2005-06, 40 per cent of the population still had a BMI below normal (i.e. the ratio of weight in kilograms to height in metres, and is a reliable indicator of chronic hunger). EPW (2011) 'Malnutrition and ICDS', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XLVI No. 12.
- ⁵ GDP has doubled between 1990 and 2005.
- ⁶ The rate of undernutrition during this period stagnated, but the rapid rate of population growth resulted in an increase in the absolute numbers of hungry people.
- ⁷ Outlook (2009) '4800 Starvation Deaths in India in Last 4 Years: Naqvi', 2 August 2009; Singh Bijay Kumar (2010) 'No starvation death in India in last 3 years, says minister: others say it's a cover up', Tehelka, 12 November 2010.
- ⁸ Raval Anjali (2011) 'Economic fears as Indian food prices soar', *Financial Times*, 6 January 2011.
- ⁹ National Sample Survey, 2008, Household Consumer Expenditure in India 2005-6, NSS 62nd Round, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, National Sample Survey Organisation, Government of India
- ¹⁰ *The Telegraph* (2011), 'Bid to Tweak Farm Act', 21 March 2011.
- ¹¹ P. Sainath (2011) 'Farm suicides: a 12-year saga', *The Hindu*, 25 January 2010. The entire archive by P. Sainath on farmer suicides and agrarian distress in India can be accessed at: <http://www.indiatogether.org/opinions/psainath/#vid>
- ¹² EPW (2010) 'Jobless Growth', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 25 September 2010, Vol. XLV, p.39
- ¹³ The change from the low rate of growth of 0.7 per cent began in 1980–81 and per capita income climbed to 3.4–3.7 per cent annually in the two succeeding decades. Over the past five years in particular, per capita income has rapidly accelerated to 7 per cent per year, despite the global economic crisis and drought years.
- ¹⁴ Between 1981–82 and 2004–5, with combination of pre- and post-reform phases, there was a distinct trend of 'jobless growth' acceleration and capital intensification at the expense of creating employment. K.P. Kannan and G. Raveendran (2009) 'Growth sans employment: a quarter century of jobless growth in India's organised manufacturing', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 7 March 2009, pp.80-91.
- ¹⁵ The National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) in June 2008 estimated that the literacy rate in the adult population (age 15 and above) was 66 per cent.
- ¹⁶ Tendulkar Committee Report estimates of 37 per cent recently updated.

- ¹⁷ The rural population in March 2010 was 70 per cent of India's total. Estimates based on the recently revised poverty lines (based on the recommendations of the Tendulkar Committee Report) show that about 42 per cent of the population in rural areas and 26 per cent in urban areas live under the poverty line.
- ¹⁸ In 2003–04 about 41.6 per cent of households in rural India did not own any land other than homestead land (of these, about 10 per cent did not own even homestead land). The extent of landlessness went up by as much as 6 percentage points between 1992 and 2003–04. The Gini co-efficient of ownership of land other than homestead land increased from about 0.73 to about 0.76 over this period. Rawal (2008) 'Ownership holdings of land in rural India: putting the record straight', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 8 March 2008, pp.43-47.
- ¹⁹ Jha (2007) 'Investment and Subsidies in Indian Agriculture', ASARC Working Paper 2007/03.
- ²⁰ Officially, within ten years from 1991, the number of Indian farm households in debt almost doubled from 26 per cent to 48.6 per cent. P. Sainath (2010) 'Of luxury cars and lowly tractors', CounterPunch, 28 December 2010.
- ²¹ According to the GOI Economic Survey, food-grain production in India declined from 208kg per capita per annum in 1996–97 to 186kg in 2009–10, a fall of 11 per cent. Despite reduced production, India has been exporting on average 7m tonnes of cereals per annum, causing availability to decline further by 15 per cent from 510g per capita per day in 1991 to 436g in 2008. Saxena (2011) 'Food Security in India', Inclusion, www.inclusion.in.
- ²² Government of India (2011) 'Economic Survey, 2010–11, Chapter 8: Agriculture and Food Management', <http://indiabudget.nic.in/es2010-11/echap-08.pdf> (last accessed 30 March 2011).
- ²³ Anand (2010) 'Green Revolution in India wilts as subsidies backfire', Wall Street Journal, 22 February 2010.
- ²⁴ About 27 per cent said they did not like farming because it was not profitable. Only 4 per cent had ever insured their crops and 57 per cent did not even know that crops could be insured. The Hindu (2005) 'Given a choice, 40 per cent farmers will quit', 1 August 2005.
- ²⁵ *Dalits* were traditionally regarded as 'untouchables' and referred to in the Constitution as scheduled castes.
- ²⁶ Quote from India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, while inaugurating a dam on 22 October 1963.
- ²⁷ *Adivasis* belong to indigenous tribes who are constitutionally classified as scheduled tribes.
- ²⁸ Tribal communities form 8.2 per cent of India's population but they account for 40 per cent of the total population displaced by development projects. ActionAid (2008) 'Resource Rich, Tribal Poor: Displacing people, destroying identity in India's indigenous heartland', New Delhi.
- ²⁹ *The Hindu* (2010) 'It is 'no' to Vedanta's mine project in Orissa', 24 August 2010.
- ³⁰ The Mines and Mineral Development and Regulation Act, which is currently awaiting approval by the Indian Cabinet, proposes requiring mining companies to share 26 per cent of profits with local people affected by projects. Sharma (2010) 'Should locals get 26% of mining profits?', Business Standard, 29 September 2010.
- ³¹ UNICEF (2011) 'The State of the World's Children 2011: Adolescence – An Age of Opportunity', New York: United Nations Children Education Fund.
- ³² *Ibid.*
- ³³ Dreze (2001) 'Starving the Moon', *The Hindu*, 26 February 2001.
- ³⁴ <http://www.righttofoodindia.org/>
- ³⁵ P. Sainath (2007) *op. cit.*
- ³⁶ <http://indiabudget.nic.in/ub2008-09/bs/speecha.htm> (last accessed 30 March 2011).
- ³⁷ Promising proposals in the NFSB include the creation of a new decentralised administrative cadre for redressing grievances, an emphasis on extending minimum support prices to farmers across states, and promotion of nutritious and affordable coarse millets. <http://nac.nic.in/foodsecurity/nfsb.pdf> (last accessed 30 March 2011).
- ³⁸ NDTV Correspondent (2010), Supreme Court to Pawar: It's an order, not suggestion, NDTV, 31 August 2010

- ³⁹ Varadarajan S. (2010) 'Order on free grain to poor can't be executed, says Manmohan Singh', National, News, *The Hindu*.
- ⁴⁰ Diarchy between the President of the Congress Party and her appointed Prime Minister. Puri (2011) 'PM evades real problem', *The Statesman*, 16 February 2011.
- ⁴¹ NAC, 2011, Note on the Draft National Food Security Bill 21 January 2011, <http://nac.nic.in/foodsecurity/nfsb.pdf> (last accessed 7 March 2011)
- ⁴² Targetting is undertaken by 'Below Poverty Line' surveys. But the 2002 version misidentifies almost half the poor as non-poor, and conversely almost half the non-poor as poor. Jalan, J. and R. Murgai (2008). *An Effective 'Targeting Shortcut'? An Assessment of the 2002 Below-Poverty Line Census Method*. Background Paper for World Bank (2011), Social Protection for a Changing India, South Asia region, World Bank. Till 1997 India had a more efficient universal public distribution system. Swaminathan, M (2000), *Weakening Welfare: The Public Distribution of Food in India*, Left Word.
- ⁴³ Patnaik (2011) 'PM's panel splits hairs, misses the elephants on food security', *The Times of India*, 4 February 2011.
- ⁴⁴ One of the plans announced by the Ministry of Women and Child Development is to use mobile phones in some *anganwadis* on a pilot basis to collect and collate information on the ICDS. Dhawan (2011) 'Mobiles to monitor govt food programme', *The Times of India*, 30 January 2011. Anganwadi is a government sponsored child-care center under the Integrated Child Development Scheme for children in the 0-6 age group. The word means "courtyard shelter" in Hindi.
- ⁴⁵ EPW (2011) 'Malnutrition and ICDS', op. cit.
- ⁴⁶ [nrega.nic.in/DMU reports/2009-10](http://nrega.nic.in/DMU_reports/2009-10)
- ⁴⁷ <http://indiabudget.nic.in/ub2011-12/bs/bs.doc> (last accessed 30 March 2011).
- ⁴⁸ Planning Commission (2005) 'Performance Evaluation of the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS)', Government of India.
- ⁴⁹ <http://indiabudget.nic.in/ub2011-12/bs/bs.doc> (last accessed 30 March 2011).
- ⁵⁰ P. Sainath (2011) 'Corporate socialism's 2G orgy', Columns, *The Hindu*, 7 March 2011.
- ⁵¹ Vidal (2011) 'Ethiopia at centre of global farmland rush', *The Guardian*.
- ⁵² Choithani (2009) 'Entry of Corporate Retail: Impact on Hawkers and Small Retailers, A case study from Mumbai', Focus on Global South. www.indiafdiwatch.org (last accessed 30 March 2011).
- ⁵³ Kamdar (2008) 'The Threat of Global Food Shortages – Part II', YaleGlobal.
- ⁵⁴ Government of India (2009) 'India Urban Poverty Report', Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation. By 2030 over 575 million people will be living in cities and towns, 41 per cent of India's population – up from the current level of 286 million.
- ⁵⁵ India's annual fertiliser subsidy bill increased to more than \$20bn in 2008, from about \$640m in 1976. Anand (2010) 'Green Revolution in India wilts as subsidies backfire', op. cit.
- ⁵⁶ Soils are suffering from varying degrees of degradation owing to deforestation, poor irrigation, inadequate drainage, and overgrazing.
- ⁵⁷ S. Mahendra Dev, K.P. Kannan, and Nira Ramachandran (2003) 'Towards a Food Secure India: Issues and Policies', Institute of Human Development, New Delhi and Centre for Economic and Social Studies, Hyderabad.
- ⁵⁸ Haq (2010) 'India's mountains of shame', *Hindustan Times*, 30 March 2010.
- ⁵⁹ ActionAid (2010) 'Who's Really Fighting Hunger: Why the world is going backwards on the UN Goal to halve hunger and what can be done', HungerFREE Scorecard, Johannesburg: ActionAid International.
- ⁶⁰ D. Bandyopadhyay (2008) 'Does land still matter?', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 8 March 2008.

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