

India: Fictional lines will end human lives

(Edited text of a statement by the Asian Human Rights Commission: AHRC-STM-127-2011, 26 September 2011)

Today, as always, there is a heated debate within the country on the basis of poverty estimations. The Tendulkar Committee in January 2010 suggested 15 rupees in rural areas and 18 rupees in urban areas per day, based on per capita expenditure at 2004-05 prices, for India's national poverty line. Under high criticism from civil society the Supreme Court of India asked the Committee to revise this meagre amount, which is being more aptly termed as a 'starvation line'. According to the affidavit published on 20 September 2011, it appears that the Commission will revise the poverty line by merely taking into account the 2009-10 data on per capita expenditure, rather than adjusting its methodology or indicators to identify the poor. The poverty line is a rudimentary tool to mitigate poverty and deliver social security services. If its methodology is flawed, so will be its delivery.

According to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) report 2011—*notwithstanding that none of the data reflect the real situation but in fact tend to underestimate its seriousness—*India contributes to a large proportion of the world's poor living on less than USD 1.25 a day. In 1990, 49 percent of South Asia lived on less than USD 1.25 a day, which came down to 39 percent in 2005. When India is excluded from the data however, the figure goes down further to 31 percent. The report observed however, that South Asia showed no meaningful improvement in the prevalence of underweight children in the poorest households between 1995 and 2009. According to the Global Hunger Index, based on the data from 2003-08, the situation of hunger is still higher in India than other South Asian countries.

The various poverty indices reveal the gap between the national and international standards of poverty, as well as the state's political will to eradicate poverty and hunger. The World Development Indicator 2011 published by the World Bank shows that India is the only country that considerably underestimates its poor population. Other countries in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa that face similar levels of poverty put far more effort into eradicating poverty and hunger, and either have higher estimates of poor through their national poverty line compared to the international line, or have little gap between the two:

Country	Population by national poverty line (%)	Year	Population by international poverty line (%) (poor living on less than 1.25 USD)	Year
India	27.5	2005	41.6	2005
Pakistan	22.3	2006	22.6	2006
Bangladesh	40.0	2005	49.6	2005
Republic of Congo	75.7	2005	54.1	2005
DR Congo	57.7	2005	59.2	2006
Ethiopia	38.9	2004	39	2005
Brazil	21.4	2009	3.8	2009

The international poverty line reflecting income poverty is also challenged. To achieve the MDGs and to assess the country's position globally, multidimensional indicators must be used. While contributing to the high rate of global hunger and the malnutrition of children and mothers, how has the Indian government attempted to mitigate poverty? Its economic growth-oriented policy has done little to bring down the high numbers of poor; the same can be said of the prevalent corruption in distributing food

subsidies and other social security programmes. Additionally, the government's intentional failure in identifying its poor population exposes its sheer lack of willingness to eradicate poverty and hunger.

The Acute Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) suggests that India's MPI value is 0.296 and its proportion of poor is 55.4 percent. The MPI gives equal value to three indicators—health, education, and standard of living. On the other hand, the BPL survey in Madhya Pradesh discovers that many poor would be excluded from the BPL survey: those categorized as Primitive Tribe Groups, amongst the most vulnerable of tribes for instance, are excluded for owning 2.5 acres or more of land, irrespective of the land's productivity. Woman-headed households, households with disabled persons, or manual labour households can be excluded because they have motorized vehicles or a Kisan (peasant) credit card. Some can be excluded as they were allotted housing under the government housing scheme (IAY).

By underestimating and non-visualizing the poor through fictional methods, the government will surely kill them, as well as perpetuate further poverty and hunger in the future. The international society should recommend more appropriate indicators to the government to achieve the MDGs. The Asian Human Rights Commission urges the Planning Commission to revisit its methodology for the poverty line, and to take civil society demands into account. The civil groups of Madhya Pradesh sent a letter to the Planning Commission, which we reproduce below:

Dear Shri Montak Singh,

I am writing a very small note, because you have no time for poor usually.

What I have learned about Planning Commission is that, this institution do not hear voices of the poor. As these people are considered to be burden on economic growth. But let me assure you that Poverty Line prescribed by Planning Commission will certainly kill hundreds of thousands of people silently.

Hunger and Hungry do not make noise. They live short life silently and die with silence. They are left with no energy to express their own concerns over what India's Planning Commission is doing with them.

I would, anyway, like to request you to think over it again that why you want people to keep Hungary and Malnourished!! What is your feeling and belief behind this? I am of firm understanding that you just don't want society to decide what is poverty and who is poor. You want to decide at your level because you want to justify, wrongly, that economic growth policies have contributed in decreasing poverty, hunger and vulnerability in India. Whereas the truth is just opposite to your efforts.

If you don't agree with me, I would request you to live on this amount for six months and show that survival is possible on this expenditure, if you can do so, at least I would join your concept. Otherwise for the sake of humanity please don't play with the vulnerability of people living with hunger and poverty.

Sincerely,

An Open Letter from the Steering group of the Right to Food Campaign to the Planning Commission of India, forwarded by the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC): [AHRC-FOL-013-2011](#), 30 September 2011

Montek Singh Ahluwalia,
Deputy Chairperson,
Planning Commission of India,
Yojana Bhawan,
New Delhi

Dear Mr. Ahluwalia,

INDIA: The affidavit of the Planning Commission in the Supreme Court should be withdrawn

While you were abroad deliberating on global matters, the Planning Commission filed an affidavit in the Supreme Court claiming that the “poverty line of Rs.25 and Rs.32 (rural and urban areas respectively) ensures the adequacy of private expenditure on food, health and education”. The affidavit could not have come at a worse time when food inflation was pushing poor households to the wall even as 60 million tonnes of grain are piling in Food Corporation of India (FCI) godowns implying that the government itself is hoarding grain to increase food prices.

The affidavit filed by the Planning Commission in the Supreme Court skirted the two major issues that were raised by the highest court in the country: why there should be a poverty line that determines the Below the Poverty Line (BPL) “caps” and, a request by the Bench to the Planning Commission to reconsider the poverty line. That the affidavit chose to skirt these two major issues, and chose instead to repeat the stand taken by the Planning Commission in its last affidavit in May 2011 is, we believe, an affront to the poor of this country and also the Supreme Court.

Subsequently, you have gone on defensively to say that the poverty line has no relationship to food subsidy. Yet, all central government allocations for programmes such as Public Food Distribution System (PDS), pensions etc. are made based on these poverty ratios. Further, after drawing a ridiculously low poverty line you suggest caps on the BPL category as well as a 41 percent cap on food subsidy, which is a contradiction in terms. Perhaps you may explain to the lay public that is spending astronomical amounts on food and health care, what this poverty line is then relevant for, if not subsidies for basic needs.

Your public defense of the affidavit being “factually correct” needs to be examined against some other facts such as India being home to the largest number of hungry people, people without the advantage of education, and the highest maternal and infant mortality deaths in the world. It is also “factually correct” that India is ranked 67th out of 88 countries by IFPRI in the Global Hunger Index and that nearly half of

India's children remain under-nourished, twice as many as in sub-Saharan Africa. It also needs to be checked against the fact that the Planning Commission itself has admitted that households at this poverty line are getting 20 percent less food than they require as per the government's own norms. After years of terming the IMF and the World Bank as the sources of all knowledge for how this country's economy is to be run, you have we believe, misinterpreted the FAO to suggest that the poor need less food than what the Indian government norms state.

Mr. Ahluwalia, perhaps you need to reflect more on the fact that during your stewardship of the Planning Commission, India has fallen further behind neighbouring and poorer (in terms of per capita income) Bangladesh, in terms of most of the human development indicators.

If Rs 25 for rural areas and 32 for urban areas per capita expenditure was "adequate" then it is not clear to us that why Planning Commission members are paid up to one hundred and fifteen times the amount (not counting the perks of free housing and health care and numerous other benefits that is enjoyed by you and members of the Planning Commission).

We believe that this affidavit is a document, no less historically significant than the "India Shining" campaign that brought the downfall of a previous regime, because it reflected arrogance and contempt for the poor comparable to the views held by the Planning Commission.

Even as we write to you, over the next twenty four hours, close to 3,000 Indian children will die of malnutrition related illness. The current 'revolution' in agriculture has led to nation-wide agrarian distress, and will see 47 farmers committing suicide in India in the next 24 hours. Further, despite your repeated prediction over the last two years on inflation (particularly food inflation) going down, the expertise of the Planning Commission even on that front has been proved wrong. Despite the indisputable intellectual resources at its command the Planning Commission seems to require a reality check; perhaps spending more time in the villages and slums of this country would have achieved that.

The right to food campaign challenges you and all the members of the Planning Commission to live on Rs.25 / Rs.32 a day till such time that you are able to explain to the public in simple words the basis of the statement that this amount is normatively "adequate". If it cannot be explained, then the affidavit should be withdrawn or else you should resign.

The Steering group of the Right to Food Campaign:

Aruna Roy and Nikhil Dey (Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan, Rajasthan),
Annie Raja (National Federation for Indian Women),
Anuradha Talwar, Gautam Modi and Madhuri Krishnaswamy (New Trade Union Initiative),
Arun Gupta and Radha Holla (Breast Feeding Promotion Network of India),
Arundhati Dhuru and Ulka Mahajan (National Alliance of People's Movements),
Asha Mishra and Vinod Raina (Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti),
Ashok Bharti (National Conference of Dalit Organizations),
Colin Gonsalves (Human Rights Law Network),
G V Ramanjaneyulu (Alliance for Sustainable and Holistic Agriculture),
Kavita Srivastava and Binayak Sen (People's Union for Civil Liberties),
Lali Dhakar, Sarawasti Singh, Shilpa Dey and Radha Raghwal (National Forum for Single Women's Rights),
Mira Shiva and Vandana Prasad (Jan Swasthya Abhiyan),
Paul Divakar and Asha Kowtal (National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights),
Prahlad Ray and Anand Malakar (Rashtriya Viklang Manch),
Subhash Bhatnagar (National Campaign Committee for Unorganized Sector workers),
Anjali Bharadwaj (SNS),
V.B Rawat (Former Support group to the Campaign),
Harsh Mander, Ritu Priya (JNU).

Representatives of Right to Food (State campaigns):

Andhra Pradesh – Veena Shatrugna, M Kodandram and Rama Melkote,
Assam – Saito Basumaatary and Sunil Kaul,
Bihar – Rupesh,
Chhattisgarh – Gangabhai and Sameer Garg,
Gujarat – Sejal Dand and Sumitra Thakkar,
Karnataka – Abhay Kumar and Clifton,
Jharkhand – Balram, Gurjeet Singh and James Herenj,
Madhya Pradesh – Sachin Jain,

Maharashtra – Mukta Srivastava and Suresh Sawant,

Meghalaya – Tarun Bharatiya,

Nagaland – Chingmak Chang,

Orissa – Bidyut Mohanty and Raj Kishore Mishra, Vidhya Das, Manas Ranjan,

Rajasthan – Ashok Khandelwal, Bhanwar Singh and Vijay Lakshmi,

Tamil Nadu – V Suresh,

Uttar Pradesh – Arundhati Dhuru and Bindu Singh