Are they poor? Street children in a city

REVIEW

A Vernier Scale For Hunger
An unfinished log of efforts by governments not entirely determined to wage the prolonged battle that must be waged to end hunger.
ANURADHA RAMAN

So far, what has slipped out of the pages of newspapers and on television channels is a series of numbers—each trying to get a fix on the number of poor Indians. How many? How much? Is it 77 per cent or 28 per cent? From time to time, empirical data has been sought to peg numbers to social security schemes, however flawed that may be. Mander puts a face to the data to show the futility of splitting hairs over the poor. The battle against hunger is unlike other battles, where there is a victor and a vanquished. Here, the enemy—that is, hunger—stalks all those who have fallen through the cracks of India’s economic growth. It preys on them and wears them down till their struggle to hold on to life comes to a halt. But nobody is ever held accountable for their deaths.

This is an unfinished log of efforts by governments not entirely determined to wage the prolonged battle that must be waged to end hunger. In Mander’s book, those who go hungry jostle with those who make it to the Forbes list of billionaires. Antamma from Andhra Pradesh can usually mobilise only enough food for one meal and drinks a cup of tea at night, while the combined wealth of India’s 55 wealthiest people is $246.5 billion. Such figures make little sense when pitted against those who go hungry. Some more horrific truths emerge amidst such plenty. The average intake of food by Indians is much lower than those in other countries. What follows from this is an obvious decline in the calorie intake and protein consumption of those at the bottom of India’s economic growth ladder. This from a country whose grain production (with the exception of this year) has been going up steadily.

That women and children bear the brunt of hunger is also well known. In repeating the country’s
worst-kept secret, Mander makes a strong plea for urgent action. When action did come from the government in the shape of the Planning Commission’s figures, pegging the poor as those who live on Rs 28 per day in urban areas and Rs 22 in rural areas, it laid bare the intentions of the government. These were not poverty line figures but destitution level benchmarks: unless you dropped dead, for the Government of India, you did not qualify for aid as a poor person.

Can we agree in this country on a floor of human dignity below which we will not allow any human being to fall? Can we agree to pay more taxes so that a food security law becomes affordable to implement? Can laws fill a hungry belly, Mander asks.

He says the time to debate hunger is long past: more and more people are ending up in unmarked graves, too exhausted to put up a fight. Time is running out. But in the cynical times we live in, the government of the day may never acknowledge this.