India’s malnourished

A mess of pottage

A huge cheap-food scheme to influence voters will not end malnutrition

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“HISTORIC” and “unparalleled” were the words Sonia Gandhi, boss of the ruling Congress party, used to describe India’s new food law at a launch in Delhi on August 20th. She promised an end to hunger for the poor. More accurate terms for the law and its introduction would be “expedient” and “chaotic”. The scheme aims to reach 800m of India’s 1.2 billion people, giving each a monthly dole of 5 kilos of rice or wheat, at a nominal price. That makes it the world’s biggest serving of subsidised food. Yet it has been launched amid confusion, cynicism and claims of fiscal irresponsibility.

The food scheme became law in July when the prime minister, Manmohan Singh, Mrs Gandhi’s factotum, introduced it as an ordinance—a rarely used executive power to which Parliament eventually has to agree. Mrs Gandhi fears a thumping at a general election due by the end of May, so Congress is now rushing to push the scheme through. Parliament still has to be persuaded. She sought to tie the bill to the memory of her husband, Rajiv Gandhi, who was assassinated two decades ago and whose ballyhooed birthday was chosen as the day of the launch.

Opponents tried everything to stop the bill being discussed, but debate was set for August 22nd. The opposition Bharatiya Janata Party dares not block the bill for fear of being cast as anti-poor. The party’s de facto leader, Narendra Modi, who used to talk of the need for small government rather than populist handouts, attacked it for promising too little in the way of rations.

The new law is good in parts. It makes sense to enshrine a national obligation to give children a daily hot lunch and new mothers a six-month stipend. It is wise to promote better nutritional help and health care for under-sixes, especially girls, using the existing Integrated Child Development Services. Helping populous states with most of the poor is overdue. Hints that cash transfers might
one day replace help-in-kind are also welcome.

But much is rotten about the food scheme. It is too costly. India already spends 900 billion rupees ($14 billion) a year on a bloated system of grain procurement. Half is badly stored and rots, or is stolen. With many new recipients, the cost will rise by nearly two-fifths, to 1% of GDP. That is equivalent to what India spends on public health.

Some argue that it is not a given that the money will always be badly spent. Jean Drèze, a development economist, says that the system will improve because a wider pool of recipients can insist on better service. He cites the experience of recent programmes in Chhattisgarh state.

Yet given the chronic abuse of procurement and food schemes elsewhere, massive theft and waste will surely continue. The food scheme is also badly targeted. Surveys suggest that 2% of Indian households are hungry at some point in the year. Just over 20m people, many in tribal areas or rural bits of northern states, need more help. Yet two-thirds of India’s total population will get the new food aid. That broad splurge of handouts is driven more by raw politics than by development priorities.

It would be better to deal with pitifully bad nutrition than plain hunger. Walk around any north Indian village where grain seems adequate, and stick-thin people offer evidence of how few nutrients are being absorbed. Roughly half of all children under five are malnourished. Save the Children, a British charity, said in June that over 60m children, aged five or younger, are stunted. The consequences can be grim: damage to young brains, a reduced capacity to learn, even death.

Yet helping children requires more than a supply of base calories. A lack of protein or vitamins in diet, dirty water, neglect of girls, lack of education on hygiene and ill-nourished mothers who get pregnant too often: all contribute to the problem. Arvind Virmani, a prominent economist, argues that cleaning up water supplies, especially by building sewage systems, would do far more good against malnutrition than doling out more grain. Just a simple hand-washing campaign could be of huge help.

Even some backers of the new food act admit, in private, that more spending on public health is the greater need. UNICEF, the UN children’s agency, says that diarrhoea kills over 400 young children in India every day. Two-thirds of Indians lack proper sanitation. Some estimates suggest that 70% of drinking water is seriously polluted with sewage. No wonder, says Mr Virmani, infected people fail to absorb nutrients, whatever their diet. Only when votes are in supplying lavatories, and politicians clamour to lend their names to sewage systems, will that change.

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