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The Politics of Food

OPINION | DHANWANTI NAYAK



Dhanwanti Nayak
is Assistant Professor in
Manipal Institute of
Communications. E-mail:
dhanu.rite@gmail.com

There has been substantial coverage in the print media about the recently declared famine in Somalia. Pictures of starved and dying children have been published, creating awareness and sympathy for the famine-ravaged country. Somalia has a weak, transitional government, and an Islamic insurgency group controls large parts of the southern tracts of Somalia.

Some people may mistakenly understand this to be the 'politics of food', which is only part of the politics surrounding food. Rather than referring directly to political situations in the country, invoking the term 'politics' draws our attention to political decisions, particularly policy frameworks, which directly impact on the consumption of food, even in an otherwise well-functioning democracy.

Some analysts have pointed out that Somalia has been trying to get itself declared as a famine-stricken country so that aid pours in from the international community and domestic authorities can be absolved of their (ir)responsibilities. This position appears to be cynical on the face of it, but points to some larger perspectives about the politics surrounding food.

When and how do we decide that people need food and how much? How do we define someone to be 'poor' and need 'aid'? The recently undertaken surveys reveal a range of estimates for estimating the percentage of population living Below Poverty Line (BPL) – from 30 per cent of the population to 70 per cent of it, depending on whether poverty was conceived as simply being a lack of income or whether a broader conception was used as being a lack of access to basic education, health care and the like.

These different estimates then may get quoted on different platforms in order to justify whatever it is that is being sought, from votes in domestic elections to money from international agencies.

As with poverty, so with food. Food is not just about what is consumed for survival, as a source of nutrition in terms of calories, but also about the conditions under which the people who need it can access it as a means to sustain life. Yet, everywhere in the world we find that how we access food – what we eat, how much we eat, in what form, etc., – is affected by other domains and gets severely affected by them.

We may be more familiar with caste and gender discourses which traditionally underlie many

of our activities, although their specificities may differ from region to region.

Thus, we know that social and cultural norms influence, and sometimes dictate, who can consume what and when. For instance, it is common to find in rural areas or traditional families, the males of the family eat first and the women last. This may imply that women are eating less than the men, leading to nutritional deficiencies when food is scarce.

At another level, Left critiques of food have pointed out how the increasing commodification of food has meant decreasing access for poor people for their survival needs. More recently, Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva have spoken about the commodification of ragi (a grain consumed by large numbers of people in rural Karnataka) due to the needs of European women who looked towards it as an organic alternative for babies.

Their demand reduced its availability for those who consumed it as a staple food in India. Thus, the increasing corporatisation of some domains has reduced food to a commodity, overwhelming the notion of food for survival and nutrition.

Food has become even more of a commodity or a 'product' with Westernisation, and food politics has taken another dimension: for instance, the invention of junk 'foods' has radically changed the nature of what constitutes a 'meal'. Another example is how the nature of food itself has been changed through the intervention of biotech and genetic modification of various foods and vegetables.

All over India there are different situations which reveal that there is also a politics involved in food access, farming, famines and droughts. P Sainath has spoken extensively about this in *Everyone Loves a Good Drought*, and in his subsequent newspaper writing on farmer suicides. These indicate that issues concerning famines and droughts (and irrigation and dams)

have less to do with the affordability or availability of food and water *per se* and more to do with other factors. Accessing food for vast numbers of people in any part of the world has become centrally a matter of politics.

State policy is shaped by who our political representatives think should access food and how much is the right quantity to be given to them. The National Advisory Council has gone through the drafting of the Food Security Bill to be tabled in the monsoon session of Parliament and has already seen the number crunching mentioned above.

As it now stands, 75 per cent of the BPL rural population and 50 per cent of urban population will be entitled to heavily subsidised foodgrains. Yet, this will thus cover approximately only 68 per cent of the total population, rather than the 80 per cent recommended by the NAC. This is the realpolitik of food security.

It is becoming increasingly clear that people are not dying because of lack of food or water but they lack food and water as a direct consequence of State policy and therefore die – either voluntarily as in the case of farmer suicides, or involuntarily as in the case of droughts and famines. Multinationals and corporations play their own role in this scenario.

Permitting common resources such as water to dwindle due to excessive use by corporations based on permits issued by the State as in the case of manufacture of aerated drinks is one example. But finally it is the State which is responsible for the protection of our rights as well as the common resources on which a large number of our rural poor depend upon for survival.

Thus, the lack of food and water which should be accessible to everyone, shows us not so much that India and Somalia are 'developing' or 'Southern' nations but that there are forces, domestic and international, which prevent us from being anything but that.

Who gets what and where and when are as much a matter of decisions about resources taken by some people in power as they are about the availability of those resources for the consumption of people in order to survive.

Merely being able to afford the high prices of food in today's world says nothing about its availability in the future. Given the policy situation we face today, there is no reason for any of us to remain sanguine about the availability of food and water in the future.